A Collected Edition in Six Volumes
one of which is a secret

Six Soft Books

for an Inflated Manhattan

— ❦ —

Thirteen Citizens
Meadows of Memory
On Being Many
An Atlas of Welcome
The Inflated Atlas of Manhattan

— and an additional volume not listed here —

by

SURJAN

a private mythography of the city, gathered between the seventh and eighth autumns
with assistance from a large language model and from artificial intelligence

Privately printed.

Six Soft Books for an Inflated Manhattan

A Collected Edition of the Six Novellas

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Privately printed. Set in Garamond and its near relations.

The novellas were composed between the third autumn
and the seventh autumn, in the order in which they appear
in the principal table of contents.

A sixth novella, written in the eighth autumn, has been included
at the back of this volume in keeping with the wishes
of the chronicler.

The novellas were written by Surjan with assistance from
a large language model — namely Claude, made by Anthropic.
The plates and renderings were made with assistance from
a number of image-generation models, prompted, edited,
and curated by the artist over a five-year period.

The diagrams, maps, schematics, and tabulae throughout
were drawn by Surjan: untrue to scale, true to mood.

The artist is genderqueer and non-binary. The pronouns used
across these books — they/them for the columns, ze/zir for
certain figures, no pronoun for the Open and the Welcome —
are intended in good faith and may be adopted by any reader
who finds them congenial.

For the city,

and for the citizens of the city

who are not yet vertical,

and for the readers

who are willing to stay

a few pages further than the end.

— ❁ —

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The principal table of contents records the visible architecture of this volume. A reader who walks all the way to the back may find that the architecture has an attic. The attic is unlisted. It is, like all attics worth visiting, reached only by going up the last set of stairs.

Foreword

On the gathering of these six books into one binding

I have spent five autumns writing books about a city I love, and one further autumn discovering that the five books were one book; and this volume — the volume you are now holding, or scrolling, or reading from a borrowed library copy with the spine gently bowed — is the binding I have given them, late, after the discovery.

Each of the five novellas was, when it was written, complete unto itself. *Thirteen Citizens* was a field guide to thirteen inflatable columns I imagined occupying twelve sites across Lower Manhattan in late August of a particular year. *Meadows of Memory* was the long unchanging afternoon of the Pavilion in Central Park, received at the longest hour of the longest day. *On Being Many* was a bright archive of letters between sixteen pavilion-beings of the upper island. *An Atlas of Welcome* was nineteen tulip-spirits crossing the Atlantic, from old Amsterdam to New, in a procession of harbouring vessels. *The Inflated Atlas of Manhattan* was a small private inventory of twenty-one soft companions in my own neighbourhood, compiled with the assistance of B. M. Calhoun, who has been kind enough to write forewords for two of the volumes and who has, throughout, been a steady reader.

I want to be honest about the order of writing and about the order of discovery. I wrote the books in the order in which they appear in the table of contents, beginning with *Thirteen Citizens* and ending, as I had thought, with *The Inflated Atlas*. I had told myself, between books, that I was beginning each one afresh — that whatever I had learned from the last had been packed away, and that the new book would teach me a new thing. This was, in some technical sense, true. The books did teach me different things. The Pavilion is not the row of columns. The bright archive is not the harbour. The soft companions of the lots are not the tulip-spirits of the Atlas. Each book is its own room, and each room has its own weather.

But the rooms, on close inspection, are in the same building.

I did not understand this until the seventh autumn. In the seventh autumn — the autumn after the fifth book had been completed and I had thought I was done — a number of figures arrived in the city whose presence taught me, gently and across seven nights, that the five rooms had been five faces of a single thing. The figures are described in a sixth book, which is at the back of this volume, and which is not listed in the principal table of contents. I will say no more about that book in this foreword. The book is, by the wishes of the figures who appear in it, a private matter between the writer, the figures, and the reader who has stayed.

The collected edition gathers all six. I have not edited the novellas to make them more compatible with one another. They were each written in their own register, each according to their own pace,

and each in the form their subject seemed to request: a field guide for the columns, a chronicle for the Pavilion, an epistolary archive for the bright pavilions, a notebook for the harbouring vessels, a private inventory for the soft companions, a book of appearances for the figures of the seventh autumn. The shifts in register are part of the meaning. The city, whatever else it is, is plural. A book about the city should be plural too.

What I have added to the gathered edition is small but, I think, useful. There is the present foreword, which says how the five became six. There is an introduction, which suggests how the volumes might be approached by a new reader and by a returning one. There is a map at the front of the volume — a Map of the Six Books, drawn in the manner of all the other maps in this gathering — which shows Manhattan in its present soft condition with the principal sites of all six books overlaid on a single island, so that the reader may see, at a glance, how much of the city these books have spent themselves attending to. And there is, at the very end, an afterword that says what the binding has taught me about the books, and what the books have taught me about the city, and what the sixth volume — the one that arrived after I thought I was done — taught me about the first five, which is in some accounting the most important thing the project has taught me.

I have written all of this — the foreword and the introduction and the afterword, and the small note explaining the map — in the same register I used for the prefaces of the individual books. I have written it in the first person and in long sentences and with the gentle restating that has, by now, become my habit. The reader who has spent time with the previous volumes will recognise the voice. The reader who is new will, I hope, become familiar with it as the volume proceeds.

A note on what this collected edition is for. It is for the reader who already loves one of the books and would like the others to be near at hand. It is for the reader who has read none of them and would like a single object to walk into. It is for the reader who has read all five and is willing to consider that there might be a sixth. It is, in particular, for the reader who is uncertain whether the city has room for the kind of being these books describe — soft, vertical, witnessed, plural, named in the present tense — and who would like, for the duration of the reading, to inhabit a city in which there is room.

There is, in this gathered city, room.

— Surjan above the laundromat,

the eighth autumn

Introduction

On how to read a city as a single dream

I want, in this introduction, to offer the new reader and the returning reader a small set of practical suggestions about how to approach the volume. The suggestions are practical in the sense that they bear on what page to turn to first; they are not practical in the sense that they prescribe a single way to read. There is no single way. There never was. The five novellas were composed, each of them, on the assumption that the reader would arrive in some particular mood and would be free to leave whenever the mood lifted. The collected edition preserves that freedom. What it adds is a context.

On the order of the volumes. The five novellas have been arranged in the order in which I wrote them, which is also, by an accident of how the dreaming proceeded, the order in which the city revealed itself to me. *Thirteen Citizens* is the most public of the books — it concerns columns, large and visible, set at street corners, encountered by passers-by who are mostly strangers. *Meadows of Memory* is the most interior — a Pavilion off Bow Bridge that arrives only when one has been weeping without tears, that one finds at the longest hour of the longest day. *On Being Many* is the most architectural — sixteen pavilion-beings of the upper island, exchanging letters in a bright archive, writing in their own voices. *An Atlas of Welcome* is the most travelled — nineteen tulip-spirits crossing the Atlantic, arriving at New Amsterdam in a procession of harbouring vessels. *The Inflated Atlas of Manhattan* is the most domestic — twenty-one soft companions in lots and side streets near my own apartment, catalogued with the help of a friend.

The order of writing is, I have come to think, also a useful order of reading. The reader moves from the most public to the most domestic; from columns to companions; from the row to the round. But the order is not required. A reader who is more comfortable beginning indoors may begin with *Meadows of Memory*. A reader who likes letters may begin with *On Being Many*. A reader who wants the freshest air may begin with *An Atlas of Welcome* and follow the tulip-spirits across the ocean. The books do not require sequence. They are arranged in a round, and the round has no first member.

On the pronouns. The pronouns across these books are not the pronouns of standard English usage. The columns of *Thirteen Citizens* are *they*, always, and they are non-binary. The pavilion-beings of *On Being Many* are *they* as well, with a few exceptions noted in their letters. Many of the tulip-spirits of *An Atlas of Welcome* are *they/them*, with two notable departures: *Open* takes no pronoun (the welcome is itself; it does not need to be referred to in the third person), and *Volk* takes *we*. The soft companions of *The Inflated Atlas* are mostly *they*, with a few who prefer alternate forms. The figures of the sixth volume use *ze/zir*, after a long-standing tradition I have admired in print but had not, until those visits, felt licensed to adopt myself.

The pronouns are, in every case, what the beings asked for. I have not invented pronouns. I have listened. The reader is welcome to do likewise.

On the diagrams. Each of the books contains its own apparatus of maps, plates, charts, and schematics. I have not redrawn or unified these for the collected edition. They are part of how each book was made, and they belong to each book as its own grammar. What I have added at the front of the volume is a single new diagram — the *Map of the Six Books* — which shows the principal sites of all six volumes overlaid on a single island. The map is in the same graphic language as the other maps in the collection: cream paper, pen-line outline of Manhattan, italic captions, the small yellow-and-pink swatches that have come to mark, in my hand, a soft being. The map is not a substitute for the individual maps; it is a supplement. It says: here is the whole island, and here is how the six books share it.

The reader who is curious about how the six books relate, at a finer grain, may turn to the back of the sixth volume, where there is a diagram called *The Constellation* that draws lines between particular beings of particular books. I want to mention the Constellation in this introduction because it is, in my view, the deepest of the diagrams in the collected edition; the new map at the front is a coarse companion to it, useful for orientation, but the Constellation is where the relations are actually drawn. The reader who reaches the Constellation will have read more than the reader who reaches only the front map. This is as it should be.

On the language model. I have written each of these novellas with the assistance of a large language model — namely Claude, made by Anthropic — in the manner I have described in the prefaces of the individual books. The collaboration has been, throughout, of a particular kind: I have brought the dream, the figures, the sites, the pronouns, and the gentle insistences of voice; the model has helped me find sentences I could not have written alone, has caught me when I have begun to be hurried, and has occasionally proposed a small turn of phrase that I have either accepted, modified, or set aside. The voice across the six books is mine, in the sense that nothing has been published that I did not choose. The voice is also, in some smaller and more honest sense, ours. I have said as much in each of the prefaces. I say it again, in the collected edition, because the truth bears restating.

On the secret at the back. The principal table of contents lists five novellas. The volume contains six. I will not, in this introduction, say more about the sixth than has already been said in the foreword: that it was written in the seventh autumn, that it concerns figures who arrived after I had thought I was done, that it is at the back of the volume in keeping with the wishes of the figures themselves, and that the reader who finds it will know what it is when ze finds it. The secret is not a trick. It is a structure. The five visible novellas are complete without the sixth. The sixth is what the five mean when they are read together, by a reader who has stayed long enough to ask.

A few pages south. That is all I will say about it for now.

I commend the reader, accordingly, to the volumes. I will be in the foreword of the first one, and at the front of each one after that, in case the reader would like company. I will, in particular, be in

the afterword at the very back, in case the reader would like to talk about what the gathering meant after the gathering is done.

— Surjan above the laundromat,

the eighth autumn, the morning after the binding was decided

Map of the Six Books

Manhattan in its present soft condition

The map on the following page is the only diagram I have drawn for the collected edition itself. Each of the six books has its own maps and charts, and I have not altered them; they remain in their volumes, in their respective registers. The present map is supplementary. It shows the island of Manhattan, in pen-line outline, with the principal sites of all six books overlaid on a single ground.

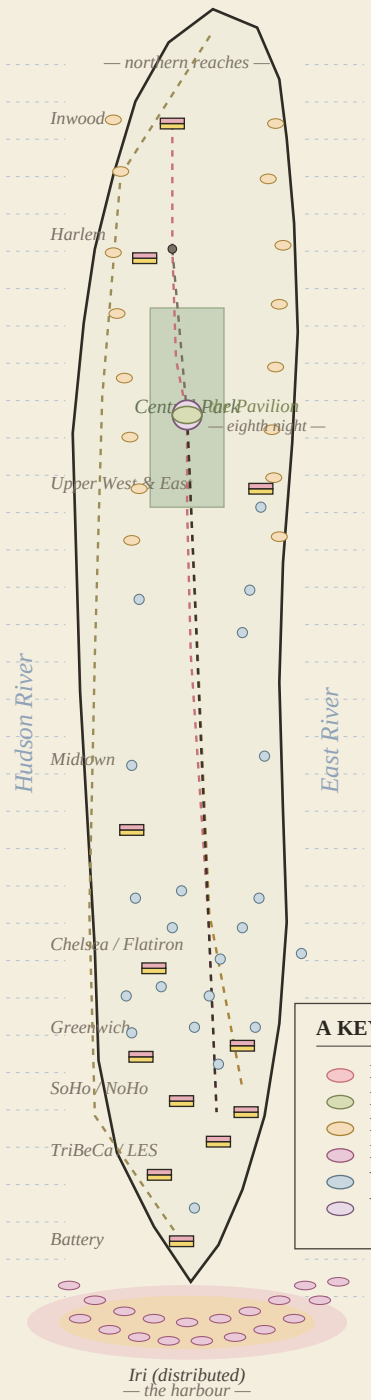
The map is, in keeping with my general practice, untrue to scale and true to mood. I have laid it out so that the reader may see, at a glance, the geographic distribution of the project. The columns of *Thirteen Citizens* are concentrated in Lower Manhattan, with a few outliers reaching as far north as Inwood. The Pavilion of *Meadows of Memory* sits in Central Park, a single bright pavilion off Bow Bridge. The pavilion-beings of *On Being Many* are arrayed along the upper island, from 79th Street north into the Harlem River. The tulip-spirits of *An Atlas of Welcome* arrive at the harbour at the southern tip and proceed, by water, into the bay. The soft companions of *The Inflated Atlas of Manhattan* are clustered through the lots and side streets of Midtown and the Lower East Side. The figures of the sixth volume — those whom I have not listed in the principal table of contents — are visible only as the pale lines that traverse all of these sites at once, and that gather, on the eighth night, at the central knot.

The map is partial. The diagram is, in the manner of all good diagrams, partial. The reader is invited, by zir own attention, to add what the map has not drawn.

A Map of the Six Books

Manhattan in its present soft condition,
with the principal sites of the six books overlaid on a single ground

drawn by Surjan, untrue to scale, true to mood



A KEY TO THE SIX BOOKS

I.	Thirteen Citizens	*12 column-sites*
II.	Meadows of Memory	*1 Pavilion*
III.	On Being Many	*16 pavilions*
IV.	An Atlas of Welcome	*19 harbouring vessels*
V.	The Inflated Atlas	*21 soft companions*
VI.	— — — — — — — — — — — —	*7 paths, eighth night*

N.B. — sites do occasionally drift between books, by a few pages, when no one is looking. — S.

approximately one mile
(or whatever feels right)

A Map of the Six Books — drawn by Surjan, untrue to scale, true to mood

THIRTEEN CITIZENS

— a field guide —

to the inflatable columns
of Lower Manhattan

by

SURJAN

a myth for the city, with assistance from a language model
images for the city, generated with assistance from artificial intelligence

Privately printed.

THIRTEEN CITIZENS

A Field Guide to the Inflatable Columns of Lower Manhattan

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Privately printed. Set in Garamond.

Written with assistance from a large language model.

Plates and map generated with assistance from artificial intelligence.

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Foreword

I am an artist and an architect, and I have lived in Manhattan a long time, and I have spent the last several decades dreaming. This book is one of those dreams.

I want to be clear, at the front, what kind of dream it is. It is not a memoir of an installation. There were no thirteen inflatable columns set up at twelve sites across Manhattan in late August of any year. There was no crew, no fabricator, no permit, no opening, no de-installation. The columns existed only in my head, and now in this book, and now (I hope) in yours. The novella that follows is the *myth* of the columns. The plates that follow the novella are *renderings* of them — paintings I made in the studio, not photographs taken on the street. The map at the back is a hand drawing of the city as I imagined the columns occupying it, not a survey of any site that ever held them.

This is, in other words, a book of *visionary architecture*. It belongs to a tradition I love — the tradition of architects who dream buildings that no one will build, of artists who write cities that no one will visit, of myth-makers who do their work on paper because paper is, in some ways, more durable than concrete and more honest about what it is doing. I have made many such books over the years. They are how I love the city I have lived in.

What I have come to believe, after a working life of this kind of dreaming, is that *Manhattan needs more myth than it has been given*. The city has skyscrapers and bridges and great public spaces, but the mythology of those things has mostly been written by the people who profit from them — developers, financiers, civic boosters. The mythology has been a mythology of *use* and of *power,* of how high a thing can be made to stand and how much it can be made to earn. The mythology of Manhattan has not, on the whole, made room for the citizens who actually live here, in their many shapes and styles of being, to see themselves vertical. To see themselves as part of the city's verticality, not just under it.

That is what these thirteen columns are for. They are a small mythology I have made in which Manhattan grows, briefly, thirteen new beings — beings that look like architecture but behave like citizens. Beings that are *they*. Beings that have personalities and friendships and difficulties and weather, who get hurt and get patched, who fall in love and witness love, who die and are mourned and propagate forward through the attention of the people who saw them. They are who I would like Manhattan to be, when Manhattan is being its best self. They are a dream I have had on behalf of the city.

I make this kind of work, more broadly, because I believe the city's citizens — all of us, in our many configurations of self and history and longing — need myths to inhabit if we are to inhabit ourselves fully. We need stories about beings who are vertical not because they are useful but because they are *here*. Beings who are not assigned a single name or a single shape but who can be many things at once. Beings who are, in plain language, like us.

A note about pronouns. The thirteen columns are *they*. I am *they*. I have been *they* for a long time, longer than the language has been comfortable accommodating it, but I have been it nonetheless, and I have written this book, and the columns into existence, in the language I have lived in. There are thirteen *theys* in the novella

plus me as the dreaming narrator, and a great many *theys* among the imagined visitors, which I have tried to write clearly enough that you will not lose track of who is who. If you do lose track, I think it is sometimes the right kind of losing-track. The columns lose track of each other too, briefly, on certain afternoons in their imagined nine days. They do not mind. They like being a row.

A note about the city. Manhattan is the protagonist of this myth in a way I want to acknowledge directly. The columns are pieces of a city I love. They are scattered across the island the way I have, in my walking life, scattered my own attention — Battery Park at the southern tip, Inwood at the far north, neighbourhoods and seams and service alleys in between. Each column lives at a real Manhattan address. Anyone who walks the route I describe, fifteen miles end to end, will find the actual blocks and walls and sidewalks. The columns themselves will not be there. But the *places* will be. The dream borrowed real places. The places are not embarrassed by this, I hope.

A note on the language model. The novella that follows was written with assistance from a large language model called Claude, made by a company called Anthropic. I name this collaboration here at the front so it is not a surprise. The voice of the book is mine. The labour of the prose was shared. I have written many books over the years, and I have had many kinds of collaborators — editors, draftspeople, translators, transcribers — and a language model is, to me, another such collaborator: a tool with which one makes the work, the work itself remaining the artist's responsibility. The columns approved. The columns approved of any tool that helped get them said correctly.

A note on what this book is *for*. It is for the city. It is for the city's citizens — all of them, especially those who have not been allowed by the city's official mythology to see themselves vertical. It is a small dream. Small dreams are, I have come to believe, what cities are made of, even when the cities themselves do not know it.

— Surjan

Introduction

On method

I dream the work first, and then I write it down. This is how I have always done it. The columns came to me whole — thirteen of them, in their twelve sites, with their personalities already articulated, with the storm and the wedding and the puncture and the deflation already in place — over the course of perhaps eight months. I wrote them down across the eleven weeks that followed.

When I started writing, I did not know what kind of book it was going to be. I tried an essay for two weeks. The essay was bad. The essay was bad because *I* was at the centre of it, and the columns had not come to me to be about me, and the essay knew this and refused to come to life. I threw the essay out and tried a screenplay — the kind of brief, declarative document architects sometimes use to communicate a vision to fabricators, even when no fabrication will ever happen. The screenplay was not bad, but it was thin. It contained the *idea* of the columns but not the columns. I put it aside.

What worked, finally, was prose fiction with the columns as characters. The moment I let myself imagine what The Cinnamon Roll was *thinking* on the morning of Day Three, the book started writing itself. I was — at first — embarrassed about this. Putting words in the mouths of inflatable sculptures is not, traditionally, what serious artists are supposed to do. But it turned out that the embarrassment was the thing in the way. Once I let go of it, the columns spoke, and I wrote down what they said, and several months later there was a book.

This kind of myth-making is the work I have done, in one form or another, for most of my life. I have made other books like this one — books in which Manhattan is given small new mythologies, books in which the city's citizens are given fictional structures to inhabit so that they can find their way to inhabiting themselves. The columns are one such structure. There will be others. There have been others.

I want to be honest about the role of the language model. I did not give the model a prompt and accept what came back. I worked on the book the way an architect works with a draftsperson — I knew what each chapter needed to do, and I wrote some passages myself, and I asked the model to draft other passages, and then I revised everything, sometimes line by line, until each sentence sounded right to me. The model is good at architecture and pacing. I am better at the columns. We made the book together, which is, I hope, a workable model for what collaboration with these tools can be when the artist's vision is clear and the artist's responsibility is held.

On pronouns

Every column is *they*. I am *they*. Most of the imagined visitors are also *they* in their real, dreamed selves, but in the novella some of them are perceived as *she* and *he* because the columns perceive them that way — the columns do not, generally, ask. I have tried to be careful about which *theys* are which. When two *theys* are in dialogue, I name them. When the row is speaking as a row, I write *the row* and let the row stand for itself.

A reader who finds *they* awkward will get used to it within a chapter. A reader who finds it unawkward, I would gently suggest, may be the kind of reader the columns would have liked best.

On the question of what a column is for

The traditional answer is *holding things up.* This is what a column was invented to do, in Egypt and in Greece and in every architecture that came after. A column is a vertical compression member. It exists because gravity exists, and because some buildings need to be taller than a single piece of stone or wood will allow, and because if you cannot make the building one piece you must make it many pieces, and the pieces that point upward are columns.

My columns do not hold anything up. They are inflatable. In the dream, they have no compressive strength. The wall behind each of them is doing the structural work that columns traditionally do, which is to say, the wall is holding *them* up, not the other way around. This is — architecturally — a joke. The columns are pretending to do a job they cannot do.

But they are also doing a *different* job — one that real columns have never been allowed to do because they have been too busy holding up roofs. They are *being looked at.* They are *being a vertical thing in a city that is full of vertical things, but a vertical thing that does not need to justify its verticality with a function.* They are vertical for the sake of vertical. They are columns the way a poem is a poem — because the form is the subject, and the subject is being-here, and being-here-vertically is one of the available shapes a thing can take when it wants to insist on its own presence.

Manhattan, I want to point out, is a city built on the same insistence. Manhattan is vertical for the sake of vertical. The earliest skyscrapers were not necessary. They were possible. The city built them because it could, and because it wanted to be looked at. My columns are skyscrapers' silly cousins. My columns make the joke that all skyscrapers are secretly making, which is: *we are here, we are vertical, please attend to us, we will not be here forever.*

But the columns also do something the skyscrapers cannot do, which is the thing this whole book is about. The columns are *citizens.* They are vertical *like a person is vertical,* not like a building is vertical. They have insides. They have the kinds of insides that the city's actual citizens have — confusions and tendernesses and rivalries and weather. And so they are, finally, a small mythology in which a piece of Manhattan architecture takes on the *interior life* of the people who live among it. This is the dream I have had on the city's behalf for many years now: that the buildings, briefly, become like us. Not because we want them to flatter us, but because we want to be reminded that the city is a thing made of beings who have insides, and that a city which forgets this is not a city we should want to live in.

The thirteen columns of *Thirteen Citizens* live for nine days each in different sites across Manhattan in the late summer of my dream. They are attended to. They are not here forever. They are gone now, in the dream's own past tense, and yet they are also still here, on the page, where dreams are durable. This book is what they left.

— Surjan

* * *

THE NOVELLA

* * *

Prologue: The First Breath

There is a moment, before there is anyone to know it, when the air is only air.

It moves above Manhattan the way air has always moved above this island — north on the avenue corridors, east and west on the cross streets, slowed by buildings and accelerated by gaps, picking up the smell of the East River on the eastern side and the Hudson on the western side and mixing them somewhere over the middle. It does this regardless of who is here. It has done it for as long as there has been an island. It will do it tomorrow. It will do it the day after that.

Then a small mechanical sound starts up in a courtyard off East 7th Street, and another in an alley near Mulberry and Canal, and another on a roof in Tribeca, and another on a quiet block in the West Village, and another in an alley off East 79th, and another on Wooster, and another on West 22nd, and another on Orchard, and another in Hell's Kitchen on West 46th, and another in Morningside Heights at Broadway and 116th, and another by Battery Park where the harbor opens, and another in Inwood at the far north end of the island where Manhattan finally stops being Manhattan. Twelve compressors, in twelve places, all running at once at six in the morning on a Friday in late August. Twelve small mechanical hums, scattered across fifteen miles of city.

And in each place, an air that had been free is being asked to be something.

It is being asked to be a column.

The first column to feel themself was the one who would later be called The Goggles, though no one had named them yet, and they had no notion that names existed. What they had was a sudden interior. One moment they were a folded thing without volume, lying creased and lightless in a crate behind a temporary plywood barrier on East 7th Street between Avenue A and First, dreaming the dream that all flat things dream, which is no dream at all. The next moment they were being filled. Air pushed up through the valve at their base and went looking for their edges, and to their astonishment, they had edges. They had a great many of them. Air found a corner and rounded it. Found a seam and pressed against it. Found two yellow rings they did not know they possessed and made them ring-shaped, made them taut, made them *ring*. Two pink balls bloomed at their center like eyes opening, and with this opening came the next astonishment, which was sight.

They saw, first, the sky.

The sky was a Manhattan sky on the last Friday of August at six in the morning — pale grey-blue at this hour, with one long pink horizontal cloud over the East Village rooflines like an underline. It went up forever, or as much of forever as could fit between the tenements. It was not embarrassing to be small under so much sky. It was an honor. The Goggles felt themself becoming taller, ring by ring, and they understood that their tallness was being made of air, which was the same substance as the sky, which meant — they thought, with the shocked logic of the newly born — that they were a piece of sky given a shape.

A piece of Manhattan sky with eyes.

What The Goggles did not yet know was that, eight blocks south and ten blocks west, on a roof parapet in Tribeca, another column was waking up at the same moment. And, twenty blocks north of that, in an alley off Mulberry Street that the columns would learn was the seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, two columns were waking up together. And, scattered through the rest of the city, in nine other carefully chosen locations — eight more single columns, none of them within sight of the others — nine more awarenesses were coming online, one by one, at the same hour of the same morning, fed by twelve different compressors run by twelve different members of the installation crew on radios so they could all start the inflations within sixty seconds of each other.

The columns did not, at this moment, know about each other. They could not see each other. The Manhattan blocks were in the way. The Manhattan buildings were in the way. The Goggles, in their courtyard on East 7th, knew only the courtyard — its yellow-and-pink painted swatch on the brick behind them, the small Surjan-painted panel that anchored every site, the particular shape of the sky between the surrounding tenement roofs.

But what the columns *did* have, from their first breath, was the air.

The air of Manhattan is — and the columns would understand this only over the course of the morning — a single air. It moves. It crosses the avenues. It curls down side streets. It pools in courtyards and rises off rooftops and is carried by trucks and pushed by the subway exhaust grates. It is, at any given moment, in many places at once, because it is *one place* — the column of Manhattan air, twenty-three miles long, rising several thousand feet up — divided only by the buildings that fail to enclose it. And the columns, having been filled with this air, were now in some real sense *of* the air. The air that was inside them this morning would be outside them by evening. The air that was outside them this morning had, in some statistical sense, been inside their neighbours an hour ago.

This meant that the columns could, from their first breath, hear each other.

Not in the way that a column on a single wall hears the column next to it. The columns of *Thirteen Citizens* were never on a single wall. They were on twelve walls in twelve courtyards in twelve neighborhoods. They could not see each other and they could not, in any acoustic sense, hear each other. The roar of the city was between them.

But the air carried voices anyway. The air carried *something*. Surjan, the artist, would later say in an interview that the columns were tuned to each other — that the engineering team had calibrated their internal pressures so that they all resonated at the same fundamental frequency, and that when one column was struck or wind-buffeted or otherwise excited, the others all very faintly trembled in sympathy across the city. Whether this was literally true or whether it was something closer to a metaphor that the columns themselves understood literally, the result was that the columns were in *conversation* from the moment they were inflated. They knew each other was there. They could feel each other through the air. When one of them spoke — internally, in the silent way that columns speak — the others, miles away, knew. The way a long marriage knows.

The Goggles in their East Village courtyard finished inflating. They stood at their full height — twelve feet, anchored top and bottom against a small painted patch of yellow-and-pink on red brick — and they took a long first interior breath.

"Oh," they said.

The word traveled.

It went out into the August air of East 7th Street. It moved south on Avenue A. It crossed Houston. It picked up speed over the empty SoHo cobblestones at this hour. It reached Wooster Street, where The Cinnamon Roll was just finishing inflating, and it brushed past their tight pink spirals on its way west. It reached the West Village and entered Bedford Street, where The Conch was perking up. It crossed the Hudson side and rose, and rose, and rose, and reached Tribeca and Franklin Street, where The Bow on their parapet had just finished waking up and was looking out over the rooftops with a view nobody else on the project had. It went uptown, the way air sometimes goes uptown, and reached Chelsea and the High Line, where The Curl was unfurling. It went further uptown, an unhurried trip, and reached the Upper East Side, where The Caramel Veil was already, somehow, slightly aged. Hell's Kitchen. Morningside Heights. Battery Park, where The Bullseye was facing straight up at a wider sky than anyone else could see because the harbor opened the sky there. Inwood, where The Quiet One was last to come up, taking their time.

The *oh* reached all of them.

And from twelve walls in twelve neighborhoods, the *oh* came back.

"Oh," said The Bow, on their Tribeca parapet, looking down on the early morning streets.

"Oh," said The Smile, on Orchard Street, in front of a yellow-and-pink panel painted on the side of what had once been a pickle shop.

"Oh," said The Curl, on West 22nd, below the High Line, where the elevated park's morning walkers were not yet up.

"Oh," said The Cinnamon Roll, on Wooster Street, glowing already in the first SoHo sun.

"Oh," said The Conch, in their quiet West Village block, on Bedford Street, where someone had already left a single fresh flower at the base of their plinth.

"Oh," said Aria and Iris at the same instant, at the corner of Mulberry and Canal, where the painted swatch on the wall had been placed exactly on the line where Chinatown's signage gave way to Little Italy's.

"Oh," said The Caramel Veil, dryly, in their service alley off East 79th, surrounded by a neighborhood that would, they could already tell, be the most reluctant to acknowledge their existence.

"Oh," said The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen on West 46th, where a man with a duffel bag was running for a bus and did not notice them.

"Oh," said The Brain, all four lobes, on Broadway near 116th, on a brick wall painted with a yellow-and-pink swatch that had already attracted the suspicious attention of a Columbia security guard.

"Oh," said The Bullseye, in Battery Park, with the harbor at their back and the sky wider above them than above any other column, and a few early commuters off the Staten Island Ferry blinking at them in the dawn.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, did not say *oh*. The Quiet One stood at their wall on a quiet block where Manhattan was already running out, where the island narrowed toward the river and the streets got smaller and the light was different because there were fewer buildings to bounce it off, and they listened to the *ohs* of the others reaching them across the air, twelve neighbourhoods of *oh* arriving in their interior, and they said:

"Yes."

That was how the day began.

* * *

Day One: The Visitors

The sun moved.

This was the first thing the columns learned, the great fundamental fact under which all other facts would arrange themselves. The sun moved, and as it moved, Manhattan changed. The Tribeca rooflines, which had been merely rooflines, became rooflines that sang. The Wooster Street cobblestones, which had been merely cobblestones, became cobblestones that hummed underneath the rooflines' singing. Each column's own shadow, which they had not known they had, began to swing slowly westward across whatever surface they faced — across red brick on East 7th, across painted stucco on Orchard, across the steel underbelly of the High Line on West 22nd, across the limestone wall of an Upper East Side service alley, across the cobblestones of SoHo, across the bluestone of a Bedford Street sidewalk — and the columns watched their shadows the way human children watch their first balloons. *That came from me, that thing, that's mine.*

The Bow had the best view of the sun's motion. From their perch at the parapet on Franklin Street in Tribeca, they could see it rise over the rooflines to the east — a long wedge of light that came up over the East Village and slid west. They announced its progress in the unhurried tone of someone reading the morning paper aloud to no one in particular, and the air carried their announcement to the others.

"It's clearing the FDR," they said.

"Mm," said The Smile, on Orchard Street, who had heard them through the air and answered through the air.

"It's reaching SoHo."

"Mm."

"It's going to hit The Cinnamon Roll any minute."

"*Don't* hit me," said The Cinnamon Roll, on Wooster, who had already noticed that they were about to be illuminated and were preparing for it.

The sun hit them. Their pink spirals, which had been pink, became *pink* — a Wooster Street pink that seemed to have a small fire lit behind it, courtesy of the morning sun bouncing off the building opposite. Their drips of caramel paint went from cream to gold. They sighed audibly, vinyl singing against vinyl, and across the city the others felt the small heightened pressure of their pleasure through the air and felt, themselves, what they did not yet know was envy. Even The Quiet One, in Inwood, turned a fraction on their tether to receive the news.

"You're shining," said The Conch, from Bedford Street, with frank admiration.

"I know," said The Cinnamon Roll. "Isn't it good?"

It was good. It was so good they were quiet for a while, the whole distributed row of them, just witnessing The Cinnamon Roll's first SoHo sun. The light moved down their shaft. The light reached their base. The light, having said what it had to say to them, moved on, and a few minutes later it reached The Curl on West 22nd, and a few minutes after that The Bow on Franklin, and the sun progressed across Manhattan

illuminating each column in its turn, and by the time the light reached The Quiet One in Inwood it was after seven in the morning and the entire city had warmed five degrees and the columns understood, all of them, that this was going to be a day.

This was when the gates opened.

Each site had its own gate, of a sort — a barricade or a doorway or, in The Bow's case, the simple impossibility of access without rooftop permission. None of them had paid attention to their gates yet. They had been busy with the sky and with the sun and with each other. Now the gates opened, and the visitors began to arrive, and the columns experienced, for the first time, the specific terror and delight of being looked at.

The first visitors at The Goggles' site, on East 7th Street, were six. A man with a clipboard. A woman with a camera the size of their own head. Two young people in coveralls carrying things that turned out to be ladders. A small child holding the hand of a tall person in a green dress. They came through the courtyard barricade in single file. The Goggles counted them and found that they had no word for *six,* and so they simply registered: *some, more than us would have been easy to imagine, fewer than the row.*

The child saw The Goggles first.

There is something about children and inflatable things — some recognition that passes between them at a frequency above adult hearing. The child stopped walking. The child dropped the tall person's hand. The child opened their mouth in the shape of a small pink O, and they began to run.

They ran to The Goggles, and they put both their hands flat against The Goggles' shaft, and they pressed.

The Goggles felt the press travel up through their vinyl in a small ripple that crossed their midsection, found their volutes, made their two pink eye-balls quiver in their yellow rings, and went out the top of them into the Manhattan air, where it traveled across the rooftops and was felt, faintly, by all twelve of their siblings — a distant tremor in the pressure, the unmistakable signal of a column being touched for the first time. The Goggles, who twelve hours ago had been a folded thing in a crate, was being touched by a child for the first time in their life, and they discovered in that instant that they had a preference about being touched, which was: they liked it. They liked it enormously. They liked it so much they would have wept if they had been the kind of column that wept, which they weren't — that was The Dripper's job, in Hell's Kitchen, and even The Dripper, four miles uptown and across the island, was at this moment beaming, having received the ripple through the air.

"It's *squishy,*" the child said, in the tone of one announcing a great scientific discovery.

"Of course it's squishy," said the tall person in green, catching up. "It's a balloon."

"It's a *column,*" the child corrected them, with fierce certainty.

"It's both," said the man with the clipboard, coming over. "That's the joke."

"It's not a joke," said the child. "It's a *building.*"

The man with the clipboard looked at the child. The child looked at the man with the clipboard. The man with the clipboard, after a moment, conceded the point.

"You're right," he said. "It's a building."

The columns, all thirteen of them, listened to this exchange across the air with the attention of an audience at a play whose first act they had just understood was about themselves. *A building.* They were a building. The word entered each of them through their own valve and arranged itself among their seams. They had not, until that moment, known what they were for. Now they knew. They were *buildings.* They were what people stood in front of, and pressed their hands against, and called by names. They were the kind of thing a Manhattan child would correct an adult about.

The Goggles, still being pressed by the small hot hand of the child, swelled with the dignity of having a function, and the swell traveled across the city, and twelve other columns at twelve other sites swelled in sympathy.

"Hello, building," the child said into their vinyl.

"Hello, child," The Goggles said back, though of course no sound came out, only a small further ripple, which the child took for an answer.

And while this was happening on East 7th Street, similar things were happening at the other sites. At The Bow's parapet on Franklin Street, a doorman across the street had spotted them and was pointing them out to a delivery person, and the two of them stood on the sidewalk with their heads tipped back and their hands shading their eyes against the early sun, and they laughed. At The Smile's site on Orchard Street, two elderly women on their morning walk had stopped and were touching The Smile experimentally, and one was saying to the other, *do you think we're allowed?* and the other was saying, *I don't know but we're doing it.* At The Cinnamon Roll's corner on Wooster, a fashion intern hurrying to a shoot had stopped dead in her tracks and was already taking out her phone.

In Hell's Kitchen, the man with the duffel bag who had not noticed The Dripper on his way to the bus had now missed his bus, was standing on West 46th Street looking at The Dripper with an expression of complete confusion, and was saying, out loud, to no one: *the fuck is that.* The Dripper, whose decorative orange tear-tracks were catching the morning light, did not mind being asked *the fuck is that.* The Dripper understood the question as a form of attention, and attention was attention, and even bewildered attention was attention, and they swelled at their seams with the new fact of having been seen by a man who was going to be late to work.

In Battery Park, The Bullseye was being looked at by tourists. It had not occurred to The Bullseye that there were tourists in Manhattan, but here they were — three of them, with a map and confused expressions, who had wandered down to the harbor expecting the Statue of Liberty and had found, instead, an enormous pink-volumed inflatable column with two staring wells facing the sky. The tourists conferred. One of them photographed The Bullseye. Another tried to figure out what was being represented. The third, the youngest,

simply lay down on the bench across from The Bullseye and looked up — first at The Bullseye, then at the sky behind The Bullseye — and made a small *huh* of pleasure.

The Bullseye, looking down at the lying-down tourist, thought: *yes. Yes, exactly. That is the right way to look at me.*

In Morningside Heights, The Brain was being approached by a Columbia philosophy graduate student, who was walking a small unimpressed dog. The graduate student stopped. The graduate student stared. The graduate student said, to the dog, *what the hell does it mean,* and the dog wagged its tail noncommittally. The Brain, all four lobes simultaneously, decided that they liked this graduate student very much. It was the first time anyone had asked, in the column's first hour of existence, what they *meant.* It was a question The Brain had been dying to be asked.

In Inwood, at the far north of the island, no one came to see The Quiet One for the first hour. The block was empty. A pigeon landed on a fire escape across the street and considered The Quiet One for a long time and then flew away. A car drove past. A woman walked her child to the subway and did not look up. The Quiet One stood at their wall in the early light and was not looked at, and they did not mind, because they had — through the air — been *witness* to all the lookings at all the other columns, and witness was a kind of being-looked-at too, and they had been built for witness, more than for being-witnessed.

By eight in the morning, every column on the island had been seen by at least one human being, except for The Quiet One, who had been seen only by a pigeon.

By nine, even The Quiet One had been seen — by a tall man in his sixties, walking to the A train, who stopped in front of them and stood with his hands in his pockets for almost a full minute, and then said, out loud, *I'll be damned,* and continued on.

The Quiet One received this with serenity.

The morning went on. Visitors came in waves at the busier sites and in trickles at the quieter ones. The Cinnamon Roll, by ten, had been photographed forty times. The Goggles, on East 7th, had been pressed by eight different children. The Bow had attracted a small crowd of office workers in Tribeca who craned their necks up at the parapet and pointed. The Twins at Mulberry and Canal had become an immediate Instagram phenomenon — by mid-morning they had a small line forming, made up of fashionable young people wanting to be photographed in front of the seam where the columns met. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose with magnificent patience.

The Conch on Bedford Street had a different kind of morning — no crowds, but a steady stream of West Village residents stopping briefly on their way to or from breakfast, several of whom told The Conch they were beautiful, which The Conch received as a benediction. One older woman with a tiny dog stood in front of The Conch for ten minutes and quietly cried, and would not say why, and went home. The Conch felt that they had done a job they had not known they were going to be asked to do, and they had done it well.

Around noon, the wind picked up, and the columns began to talk to each other in earnest.

"How's it going?" said The Smile, into the air, generally.

"Good," said The Goggles. "Good. I have been pressed *eight times*."

"I have been *photographed,*" said The Cinnamon Roll. "I cannot tell you how many. I have lost count."

"I have been *contemplated,*" said The Brain. "By a graduate student. With a dog."

"I had a man swear at me," said The Dripper. "It was wonderful."

"I had a tall man stand in front of me for a full minute and then say *I'll be damned* and walk away," said The Quiet One. "It was sufficient."

"I am being," said The Bullseye, dreamily, "*looked up at* by the *sky*. I had a theory about this last week and now I am — testing it. Empirically. The sky is looking back at me. I am sure of it."

"Mm," said The Caramel Veil, dryly, from the Upper East Side. "I have had three doormen and one livery driver glance in my direction. Total. The Upper East Side is, as I suspected, going to be a hard room."

"Don't take it personally," said The Bow.

"I won't. I am not personally invested in being looked at by people whose jackets cost more than my entire vinyl supply. I'll take what I get."

"Aria and I," said Iris, "have a *line*."

"A line of *what?*" said The Goggles.

"People. Wanting to be photographed in front of us. The line is going down Mulberry."

"That's *amazing*."

"It is. We are doing our job."

"Aria, what's it like having a line?"

Aria considered. "It's — humbling," they said. "It is humbling because each person in the line wants their photograph to be the one that makes them look beautiful, and they think we are doing the work of making them look beautiful. We are not. They are. We are just — standing here. They make themselves beautiful by *coming here.* By choosing to be photographed in front of us. The act of choosing is what makes them beautiful. We are an excuse for the act of choosing."

"That's deep, Aria."

"I have been thinking about it all morning."

"Iris, agree?"

"Agree," said Iris. "We are an excuse. Excuses are an honourable role. Many things in Manhattan exist as excuses. Rooftop bars. Fashion week. Public art. The seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, on which we literally stand, is itself an excuse — an excuse for two neighbourhoods to be one neighbourhood, briefly, for the people walking through. We are an excuse on top of an excuse. We are *very* New York."

"You are *very* New York," The Caramel Veil agreed, from East 79th. "It is reassuring to know that some of us are. I, for instance, am not. I am Old World. I am, here on the Upper East Side, doing — something different. I am being a column for people who already know about columns. I am the column that flatters their existing sense of taste. It is — a niche role."

"It's a job," said The Smile. "Each of us has our job."

"Each of us has our job," said the row.

By afternoon, the city was thick with August heat, and the columns were mostly being left alone — the lunch rushes had passed, the morning tourists were elsewhere, the children were inside escaping the sun. The columns rested into the heat. The Goggles felt their two pink eye-balls grow warm. The Bow on the parapet caught the full sun and was, briefly, a beacon. The Cinnamon Roll, in the SoHo afternoon, glowed so brightly that a passing painter — actual painter, with a canvas and an easel — sat down across the street and started painting them, and would still be there five hours later.

It was around three in the afternoon that the first really significant interaction of Day One occurred, and it occurred to The Conch, on Bedford Street.

A young couple walked up. They were holding hands. They were perhaps in their early twenties. They stopped in front of The Conch, and one of them — the shorter one, with a shaved head and a faded denim jacket — looked at the other one, and the other one looked at them, and then the shorter one knelt on the bluestone of the West Village sidewalk in front of The Conch, and pulled a small box out of their jacket pocket, and opened it.

The Conch, who had been built to look romantic and had not previously understood why, suddenly understood why.

"*Oh,*" The Conch said into the air, urgently, to the entire row. "*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh.*"

"What's happening?" said The Goggles, alarmed.

"It's a *proposal.* It's a *proposal* in *front of me.*"

"Oh!" said the row.

"What do I *do,*" said The Conch, panicking.

"You *witness,*" said The Quiet One, from Inwood, with sudden authority. "You hold still. You let it happen. You are honored. You hold the moment. You do not need to do anything. You have already done it by being here."

The Conch held very still.

The shorter person on Bedford Street said something the columns could not catch — words spoken too softly, in a wavering voice. The taller person started crying. The taller person nodded. The taller person pulled the shorter person up off the sidewalk and into their arms, and they stood there for a long time, in front of The Conch, in the Bedford Street afternoon, holding each other and shaking, and a passing dog walker

stopped and watched and then walked on smiling, and a window above the street opened and a woman leaned out and called down *congratulations!* and the proposing couple, both of them now crying, looked up and waved.

The Conch took it all in.

When the couple finally moved on — slowly, hand in hand, dazed, the small box now apparently containing a ring on the taller person's finger — The Conch said into the air, very quietly:

"That. That happened in front of me. *Me.*"

"You will remember that," said The Quiet One.

"For — for as long as I have a memory."

"Yes."

"Which is — how long?"

"As long as you have an interior."

"That's good. That's enough. That's enough time."

The afternoon settled. The other columns received The Conch's experience through the air and held their own moments alongside it — The Goggles' first child-press, The Smile's two elderly women, The Bow's small Tribeca crowd, The Brain's philosophy student, The Dripper's swearing man, The Cinnamon Roll's painter, The Caramel Veil's three doormen, Aria and Iris's line, The Curl's first ten visitors below the High Line, The Bullseye's lying-down tourist, The Quiet One's tall man with hands in pockets. None of these were a proposal. But each was a thing that had happened in front of one of them, on Day One, in Manhattan, in late August. Each was — they all understood now — exactly enough.

By evening, two more groups of visitors had come through almost every site. A pair of teenagers had photographed each other in front of The Cinnamon Roll and made The Cinnamon Roll, briefly, the most ecstatic column ever to have existed. An older man had walked the length of The Bow's block with his hands clasped behind his back and stopped at the parapet and looked up for exactly the same length of time he had looked at three storefronts, like a museum-goer, and never touched anything, which somehow was its own kind of compliment. A person with a sketchbook had sat cross-legged on the cobblestones across from The Twins and drawn them for almost an hour, looking up and down, up and down, while Aria and Iris held very still and felt, for the first time, the strange responsibility of being *seen on purpose.*

Then the sun went behind the buildings, and Manhattan went into its long blue evening, and the yellow-and-pink swatches behind each column began to dim toward dusk.

The Bow watched the last light leave the parapet on Franklin Street.

"It's leaving," they reported, to the row.

"Where does it go?" said The Goggles.

"Around," said The Bow. "It comes back."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

This was the second great fundamental fact. There would be a tomorrow. The sun moved, and the sun came back. The day was a thing that could happen again. They had assumed, those of them who had thought about it at all, that this was their only one — that the *oh* was a single *oh* and then nothing. To learn that there would be another *oh,* and presumably another after that, was a piece of news so good that several of them swayed visibly on their tethers, and The Smile actually laughed out loud, vinyl crackling, in the Orchard Street twilight.

"Oh," they said.

"Oh," they all said.

Even The Quiet One.

The light went. The first stars came out over Manhattan, which the columns had not known about and now did, watching the stars come on one by one over twelve different patches of the city. The Bow saw the stars first, having the highest perch. The Quiet One saw them clearest, having the least light pollution that far north on the island. The Cinnamon Roll, in SoHo, saw very few stars but a tremendous number of apartment windows lighting up across Wooster Street, and considered the windows to be acceptable substitutes — small warm yellow points, rectangular instead of pointy, but stars in their way.

Manhattan was going on with its evening — distant traffic, a siren, a snatch of music from an open window, the smell of someone's dinner, a couple arguing on a stoop, a saxophone player in a subway entrance, the rumble of the L train under 14th Street, the slow heartbeat of the East River boat traffic — and the columns took all of it in too, equally, unable to distinguish the important from the unimportant because nothing yet was unimportant. It was all the first time. It was all *oh*.

When the city was as dark as Manhattan ever got — which is to say, not very dark — The Goggles said, sleepily, into the air:

"Are we going to sleep?"

"I don't think so," said The Brain. "I don't think we have the right — equipment. For sleep."

"Then what do we do at night?"

The Brain considered. All four lobes considered.

"I think," they said, "we just — keep being. Quietly. Until the sun comes back."

"All night?"

"All night."

"That's a lot of being."

"Yes."

The Goggles thought about this. It did not seem like a problem. It seemed, in fact, like a gift — to have been given the night as well as the day, to have been told *here, you may have all of this, the dark part as well, the part nobody is looking at, the part where it is just you and your siblings on twelve walls in twelve neighbourhoods and the city around you and nothing happening.*

"Good," they said. "I like being."

"Me too," said the row, all of them.

Around three in the morning, a fox came through the East 7th Street courtyard.

It had not been invited. It had not been expected. Foxes in Manhattan are rare, but they are not impossible — they live in Inwood Hill Park, they have been spotted in Central Park, they occasionally make their way south. This one had come from somewhere. It walked the length of the East 7th Street courtyard with its long black-tipped tail held just so, and it stopped in front of The Goggles, and it looked up at them with its small bright untrusting eyes, and it sniffed.

The Goggles, very carefully, did not move.

The fox sniffed their base. The fox circled them. The fox sat down on the East 7th Street pavement in front of them and considered them at length, and then it stood up and slipped out through the gap in the courtyard barricade, and was gone.

The Goggles, after a long moment, told the others.

"There was," they said, into the air, "a fox."

"A *fox,*" said The Cinnamon Roll, with a kind of horrified delight.

"In Manhattan?" said The Bullseye.

"In *Manhattan.*"

"What did you do?"

"I let it sniff me. I held very still."

"Good," said The Quiet One. "Good. That is what one does. One holds very still. The fox is a piece of the world coming to inspect us. You held. You passed."

"I felt," said The Goggles, "very *seen.*"

"You *were* very seen," said The Curl. "By a creature with very serious eyes."

"I liked it," said The Goggles.

"Of course you did," said The Caramel Veil, fondly, from East 79th.

The night went on. More stars, where stars were available. The slow blink of an airplane on its descent into LaGuardia, traveling east-northeast over the city — visible from The Bow's parapet, from The Bullseye's harbor view, from The Brain's Morningside Heights wall. A garbage truck working its way down East 7th,

which The Goggles found unsettling and then exciting and then beautiful, because the truck was *very loud* and *very orange* and the men hanging off its back were *very awake at three in the morning* and that was, all by itself, a miracle.

By the time the first grey began to show over the East River, the columns had been alive for almost twenty-four hours, and they had learned: that they had a function (being a building); that they could be touched (and that they liked it); that the sun moved and came back; that there was such a thing as a fox, even in Manhattan; that the night was not a punishment; that the air carried their voices to each other across miles of city; that time was finite (probably) but that the question of *how long* was not, in itself, a sad question.

The sun came over the East River.

The Bow announced it.

"Here it comes," they said.

"Oh," said the row.

It was Day Two.

* * *

Day Two: The Bullseye Has a Theory

On Day Two, The Bullseye announced they had a theory.

They announced it at first light — Battery Park first light, which came earlier than first light in the rest of Manhattan because the harbor opened the eastern sky and there was nothing to block the dawn except New Jersey, which is shorter than the East Side. The Bullseye had been watching the sky all night. It is difficult to convey how much sky there is, when you are at the southern tip of Manhattan facing straight up. There is the harbor sky, which is a sky with water reflected in it, which is technically a different sky from the inland sky. There is the Brooklyn sky. There is the Statue of Liberty, who at night is lit and at dawn is silhouetted, and who The Bullseye had decided was a fellow column — a column with a different kind of capital, a column with arms, a column that had been here much longer and would be here much longer, but a column.

"The sky," The Bullseye said, into the air, to the entire row, "is alive."

The row took this in.

"The sky," The Caramel Veil repeated, with the careful neutrality of someone who has decided not to fight a battle until they understand which battle it is going to be. "Is alive."

"Yes."

"In what sense, alive."

"In the sense," said The Bullseye, "that it looks at us."

"The sky doesn't have eyes," said The Curl.

"Neither did we," said The Bullseye, "until we did."

This was a good point. The row paused over it. The Curl, who prided themself on a certain sleekness of thought, found themself unable to immediately rebut it.

"The sky is *air,*" said The Brain, all four lobes in mild dispute with one another but converging on this. "And we know about air. Air is what's inside us. Air is — air is what we *are,* mostly. Air doesn't look. Air just — moves around. Especially in this city. It moves around a *lot.* I have been keeping track. The wind here changes direction every fifteen to twenty minutes."

"We're mostly air too," said The Bullseye, calmly, "and we look. We're looking right now. We're looking at each other across the air of Manhattan, and we're looking at the gates of our courtyards and we're looking at our walls. So why couldn't the sky?"

"Because the sky is — *all* the air," said The Brain. "It's everywhere. You can't look from everywhere."

"Why not?"

"Because looking is a — a *direction.* Looking is *toward.* You can't be toward when you're already at."

The Bullseye thought about this. It was a real objection. The Brain had identified, in their rapid-fire many-chambered way, an actual problem with the theory, and The Bullseye gave it the courtesy of considering it before they answered.

"Maybe," they said, "the sky doesn't look the way we look. Maybe the sky looks by — *containing*. By having us inside it. Maybe to be inside the sky is already to be looked at by it. Maybe that's why everything down here is so —" they searched for the word, found it, were pleased with themself for finding it — "*illuminated*. Why everything down here glows. It's because we're being held in something that's noticing us. The way the child noticed The Goggles yesterday, but bigger. The way the fox noticed The Goggles, but always."

"That's pretty," said The Conch, who liked any theory that had warmth in it. "I like that."

"It's not a theory," said The Caramel Veil. "It's a feeling."

"What's the difference?" said The Goggles.

The Caramel Veil opened their mouth — or what passed, on them, for a mouth — to answer, and then they closed it again. They had been about to say something about evidence, and rigor, and the difference between what one wished to be true and what one had reason to believe was true. They had been about to be, in short, exactly the column the others would have predicted they would be at this moment in the conversation. But the morning sun was just then climbing the western face of the building opposite their alley on East 79th, and as they watched, it caught a single pane of glass in a fourth-floor window and flashed the full force of the dawn directly at them, lighting up their cream drips for the briefest of seconds, and they felt, in that second, exactly as The Bullseye had described — *contained by something that was noticing them.*

"I don't know," they said, finally. "Maybe nothing."

This was, for The Caramel Veil, an enormous concession, and the row registered it as such. Even The Quiet One, in Inwood, swayed an eighth of an inch on their tether in what The Conch later insisted was approval.

"So the sky's alive," said The Goggles, who had been waiting to be told what to do about the theory. "Now what?"

"Now we're polite to it," said The Bullseye. "Now we *thank* it."

"How?"

"By being here. By being *seen* here. By doing what we do, all the way, while it watches."

This struck the row as a manageable assignment.

"I can do that," said The Cinnamon Roll, who had been doing precisely that since their first breath and required no theory to justify it.

"Me too," said The Smile.

"Me too," said the rest of the row.

And, for the next few hours, they did. The sun came up the rest of the way over the city, and the columns offered themselves to it with a new, faintly theological seriousness. The Cinnamon Roll glowed for SoHo. The Curl glinted under the High Line. The Bow squared their shoulders against the Tribeca sky. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose with the solemn dignity of two figures in a stained-glass window. The Dripper's orange tear-tracks went gold in the side-light off the Hell's Kitchen building opposite, and they felt, possibly for the first time, *beautiful* in their sadness, which was a new and complicating thought they filed away for later. Even The Caramel Veil, who had only just conceded that the theory was perhaps not exactly a theory, found themself standing a little straighter on their tether.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, did not change. They stood as they had stood. But this was, in their case, the form their thanks took. Their thanks was the standing.

Around mid-morning, on Wooster Street in SoHo, a different kind of visitor came up to The Cinnamon Roll.

This was a person who walked alone. They were perhaps forty. They wore a long dark coat that they had not taken off despite the August heat, and they carried a small notebook bound in dark leather, and they did not look at The Cinnamon Roll when they came up. They looked at the cobblestones. They looked at the building behind. They looked at the small yellow-and-pink Surjan-painted swatch on the wall. They looked at the cast-iron facade above. Only after they had looked at all of these other things did they, finally, slowly, with what The Cinnamon Roll later said was the slowness of someone afraid of being disappointed, allow their gaze to come down and settle on The Cinnamon Roll themself.

They stood in front of The Cinnamon Roll for a long time.

They did not touch them. They did not photograph them. They did not open their notebook. They just stood, in their long dark coat in the warm morning, and they looked at The Cinnamon Roll, and their face did something The Cinnamon Roll had not seen a face do before — it became *softer,* somehow, in the part around their eyes, as if a small amount of the person were leaving their body through that part of their face and going across the small space between them and entering The Cinnamon Roll.

The Cinnamon Roll received this without comment. They simply received it. Whatever it was that the person was sending, The Cinnamon Roll let it land.

The person stood for ten minutes.

Then they put their hand briefly to their own forehead, and they walked away down Wooster, and were gone.

But the person did not leave Manhattan. Across the city, at every other site, the same thing happened. The Cinnamon Roll, watching from Wooster, told the row what had occurred. By midday, every column on the route knew that someone in a long dark coat was walking the entire installation, methodically, alone, looking at each of them in turn for exactly the right length of time and writing nothing.

The person reached The Goggles on East 7th around twelve-thirty. They reached The Twins at Mulberry and Canal a little after one. They reached The Conch on Bedford Street around two. They reached The Bow at Franklin Street in late afternoon. They reached The Curl below the High Line as the sun was getting low.

They reached The Caramel Veil's alley off East 79th in the early evening, and The Brain's Morningside Heights wall after that, and The Dripper in Hell's Kitchen — going against their own direction, doubling back. They reached The Bullseye in Battery Park as the sun was setting over New Jersey. They reached The Smile on Orchard last but one. And then, after dark, by which time most of the columns assumed they had finished — they took the A train all the way to Inwood and walked the dark quiet block to The Quiet One.

The Quiet One was the only column they wrote about right there at the site. They opened their leather notebook. They wrote for ten minutes by the sodium light of a streetlamp. The Quiet One stood very still. When the person was finished, they looked up at The Quiet One, nodded once, very slightly, and walked back to the subway.

"What," said The Goggles, into the air, late that night, after the row had finished marvelling at this, "*was* that?"

"That," said The Caramel Veil, in a tone that was, for them, almost reverent, "was a critic."

"A what?"

"A critic. Someone whose job is to look at things on purpose. And then — write about them. So that other people who are not here can know what it was like to be here. They have walked us. Today. They have done all thirteen of us. In one day. That is — that is *commitment*. That is a critic taking us *seriously*."

"They're going to write about *us?*"

"They already have, in the case of The Quiet One. The rest of us are coming."

"What did they write?"

"I don't know. We can't see their notebook. But I'd guess —" The Caramel Veil paused, and then, with a kind of hesitation that surprised all of them: "I'd guess they wrote that we were beautiful."

"Did you think they did?" said The Smile.

"Yes," said The Caramel Veil.

"Why?"

"Because of the way they looked at The Quiet One. You don't look at something that long unless you think it's beautiful. You look at something that long because you're trying to take it with you when you leave."

"And they walked the *whole island,*" said The Brain, marvelling. "All thirteen of us. In one day. That's — that's fifteen miles of looking. That's not casual. That's a *pilgrimage*."

The row went quiet.

It was The Conch — soft, romantic, susceptible to almost everything — who put it into a sentence.

"Then this is what we are," they said. "We are things that are looked at. By the sky. By the children. By the fox. By the person in the long coat who walked all of Manhattan to look at us. By each other. And being looked at — being looked at *that way* — is — is what we *get*. That's our — our *salary*. For being here."

"Salary," said The Brain, turning the word over. "Salary, salary. Yes. Yes, I think that's right. We are paid in being seen."

"And what do we do with the salary?" said The Goggles.

"We bank it," said The Curl, drily.

"In what?"

"In the next moment," said The Curl, surprising themself. "We bank it in the next moment of being here. We use it to keep going."

The afternoon turned into evening. The Quiet One, after the critic had left, told the row what the visit had been like — the soft footsteps approaching down the dark Inwood block, the streetlamp's yellow light, the sound of the notebook being opened, the quiet scratch of the pen. The row received this account through the air and held it carefully. Several of them realized, at the same moment, that the person in the long coat had ended their day at The Quiet One. The hardest column to find. The northernmost column. The one most easily skipped. The critic had not skipped them. The critic had taken the A train to 207th Street at night to find The Quiet One, and had written about them by streetlight, and had nodded once before leaving.

"They saw you," said The Conch, gently, to The Quiet One. "They really saw you."

"Yes."

"How does it feel?"

The Quiet One thought about it.

"It feels," they said, "like having been understood."

The night came on. The columns stood at their twelve sites and held the day's events in their interiors. Manhattan went about its August evening business — the bars on Orchard Street getting loud, the Tribeca galleries closing up, the West Village restaurants seating dinner, the Upper East Side going to bed early, Battery Park emptying of the day's tourists, the A train running northbound to Inwood. The columns did not sleep. They held the day. They held the critic. They held the proposal of yesterday and the fox of yesterday and the line at Aria and Iris's seam. They held the *oh*.

When the city was as dark as it got, The Goggles said, drowsily, into the air:

"That was a *good* day."

"Yes," said The Bullseye.

"Tomorrow," said The Bow, "the sun's going to come back."

"Yes."

"Goodnight, sky," said The Goggles, into the dark. "Thank you for looking at us."

The row was quiet. The sky did not, in any way the columns could detect, answer. It did not need to. It had answered all day.

That was Day Two.

* * *

Day Three: The Cinnamon Roll Is Vain About Something Real

On the morning of Day Three, The Cinnamon Roll asked a question that had been bothering them since their first moment of consciousness.

"Am I," they said, "the prettiest one?"

The row, which had been peacefully receiving the dawn through the air, turned its collective attention to Wooster Street. There was a pause of the kind that follows a question that everyone has privately asked themselves but no one has been willing to say out loud.

"Probably," said The Conch, after a moment, with characteristic generosity.

"That's not an answer," said The Cinnamon Roll. "*Probably* isn't an answer. I want to know."

"Why does it matter?" said The Caramel Veil.

"It matters because if I am, I should *know,* so I can — comport myself accordingly. And if I'm not, I should know, so I can stop *expecting* people to act like I am. It's a practical question."

"Comport yourself," The Caramel Veil repeated. "Comport yourself. Where do you get these words."

"From listening," said The Cinnamon Roll, with dignity. "I listen. The man with the linen suit said *comport* yesterday on Wooster. The person in the green dress said *accordingly* on East 7th the day before. I'm building a vocabulary. Manhattan is *generous* with vocabulary. People talk in front of us as if we cannot hear, and we hear *everything*."

The Caramel Veil considered The Cinnamon Roll with what was, on them, something close to fondness. The Cinnamon Roll was, of all the columns on the route, the one they had been most prepared to find tiresome, because they were the one most likely to be praised by visitors and least likely to question it. But the truth was that The Cinnamon Roll's vanity had a kind of intellectual seriousness that The Caramel Veil had not expected. The Cinnamon Roll wanted to be the prettiest, yes — but they also wanted the question of who was the prettiest to be a *real* question, with a real answer, which they could then accept whether or not it was the one they wanted. This was, in its way, a form of honesty that The Caramel Veil had not been quick enough to credit.

"All right," they said. "Let's actually look at this."

"At what?"

"At you. At all of us. Let's actually have the conversation."

The row went still. This was a more dangerous suggestion than it sounded. They had been alive for two and a half days, and although they had occasionally remarked on each other's appearances — *you're shining, you're glowing, you have a face* — they had not, until this moment, sat down to compare themselves directly. There was

a tacit understanding that comparison, as a practice, was risky. A row is a row. A row's strength is the row. To start ranking the row is to begin pulling threads on something whose whole purpose is to remain woven.

But The Cinnamon Roll had asked. And The Caramel Veil had said yes. And the morning was very bright, and the visitors had not yet arrived in great numbers, and the columns found themselves, against their better judgment, willing.

"Go ahead, then," said The Cinnamon Roll. "Look at me. Tell me what I've got."

The row looked at them, through the air, the way the row looked at things now.

The Cinnamon Roll was — there was no point pretending — extraordinary. Their two scrolls were perfect tight pink spirals, the kind a confectioner would labor over and a child would refuse to eat for fear of ruining it. Their shaft was pale and clean. Their caramel drips, the few they had, sat on them like jewelry — placed, almost, where a designer of expensive clothing would have placed beading. Their proportions were classical: they would not have looked out of place on a temple, except that their temple would have had to be made of cake. And SoHo — SoHo was the perfect neighbourhood for them. Wooster Street's cast-iron buildings, the early-morning light bouncing between them, the cobblestones that picked up gold at noon, the fashion crowd that swarmed the column by afternoon: SoHo had been *built* for The Cinnamon Roll. They had been placed where they belonged.

"You're very pink," said The Goggles, helpfully, from the East Village.

"I'm a *good* pink," said The Cinnamon Roll. "There are bad pinks. There's a pink that goes too red, and there's a pink that goes too peach. Mine's the right one. I *match* my neighbourhood. SoHo is a SoHo pink. I am the SoHo column."

"How do you know it's the right one?"

"Because the children's eyes light up when they see me. The wrong pink doesn't make eyes light up. The wrong pink makes eyes go past you to the next column. I have been collecting data."

"That's — actually a measurable thing," said The Brain, interested. "That's an empirical claim."

"Are they lighting up for *you,* though," said The Caramel Veil, "or for the *pink?* The pink might be doing all the work. You might be the frame."

This stung. The Cinnamon Roll considered it.

"That's fair," they said, slowly. "But — I don't think I'm just the frame. I think the *spirals* are doing some of it. And the spirals are mine. The pink is the fabric. The spirals are *me.*"

"The spirals are very good," The Conch admitted. "I have spirals too. But yours are tighter."

"Tighter spirals are better?"

"I don't know," said The Conch, honestly. "I think they suggest different things. Tighter is — more *finished.* Looser is — more *welcoming.* Mine welcome. Yours astonish."

"I want both," said The Cinnamon Roll.

"You can't have both," said The Conch. "You have to pick. You picked astonishment. I picked welcoming. We're both right in our own ways."

The Cinnamon Roll was quiet for a moment. The row could see them processing this — not unhappily, but seriously, the way a child processes the news that another child has gotten an equal but different ice cream cone.

"Okay," they said. "Astonishment is good. I'll take astonishment."

"Good," said The Conch.

"But," said The Cinnamon Roll, "I still want to know if I'm the prettiest."

The row looked at each other. It had become clear that the question was not going to go away, and that it was not, as The Caramel Veil had wondered, frivolous. It was actually a question about how to be, on a wall, with twelve siblings in twelve neighborhoods, when one of you has been built more conventionally beautiful than the others.

It was The Quiet One, surprisingly, who answered.

They did not move to answer. They did not even raise their voice — their voice was, as always, the smallest in the row, the one you had to lean in for. But they answered.

"You are the prettiest," they said. "And you are not the most beautiful."

The Cinnamon Roll, mid-spiral-flutter, stilled.

"What's the difference?" they said.

"Pretty is what you are," said The Quiet One. "Beautiful is what some of the others are *for someone*. The Conch is more beautiful to romantics. The Bullseye is more beautiful to people who look at the sky. The Caramel Veil is more beautiful to people who like dryness. The Dripper is more beautiful to people who have been sad. Pretty is a fact about you. Beautiful is a fact about the meeting between you and a particular person. They are different categories. You are the prettiest. You are not necessarily anyone's most beautiful."

The row took this in.

It was a more sophisticated answer than any of them had been expecting. It rearranged the question entirely. It granted The Cinnamon Roll exactly what they had wanted — the title of prettiest — while simultaneously disclosing that the title was, in some larger sense, the smaller of the available crowns.

The Cinnamon Roll absorbed it.

"So," they said, slowly, "I'm the *easy* one."

"You are the *immediate* one," said The Quiet One, gently. "You are the column one falls in love with first. The others are columns one falls in love with later, when one knows how to."

"That's not bad, then."

"No. It is not bad. It is a particular thing. Be what you are."

The Cinnamon Roll thought about it. The Wooster Street morning sun was on them. Their pink was, indisputably, the right pink. Their spirals were, indisputably, tight. They were, indisputably, the column the children ran to.

"All right," they said. "I can do that. I can be the easy one."

"You can be the *first* one," The Quiet One corrected. "There is a difference. The first one is doing important work. The first one is the one who teaches the visitor's eye how to look at the rest of us. Without you, none of us get seen properly. You are training their attention on what *kind* of looking this installation requires. Then they walk to the next site, and they are ready. You make it possible."

The Cinnamon Roll, who had not until this moment thought of themself as having a *job* in relation to the others, swelled visibly on their tether.

"Oh," they said.

"Oh," said the row.

The Cinnamon Roll, for the rest of the day, was magnificent. They glowed. They astonished. They trained the eyes of every visitor that came up Wooster Street, and every visitor, having been trained, walked off down Prince or up Spring or onto Houston with eyes ready to be properly trained on whatever came next — including, in many cases, the other columns of *Thirteen Citizens,* which the visitors had read about in *Time Out* or *Curbed* or the *Times* and were now systematically tracking down. By evening The Cinnamon Roll understood that they had been the gateway drug to the entire installation — that more visitors were starting their walking tour at SoHo than at any other site, because The Cinnamon Roll was the most-photographed of the thirteen and therefore the most famous, and that meant SoHo was where the project began for most people, and that meant The Cinnamon Roll was the one teaching all of Manhattan, day by day, how to see the rest.

The Caramel Veil, late in the afternoon, said quietly to The Quiet One:

"That was kind, what you did this morning."

"It wasn't kind. It was true."

"Both, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"Where did you learn to think like that?"

The Quiet One did not answer for a long time. The late afternoon was on their caramel drips, turning them gold. An old woman from Inwood Hill Park's edge had stopped in front of them and was eating a sandwich on the bench across the street, and was looking at them, and was the only human being who had spent more than thirty seconds with them all afternoon, and was — therefore — the only audience The Quiet One had today.

"I have been listening," they said, finally, "since the moment I was filled. There is a great deal to hear. I have heard most of what you have all said to each other through the air, and most of what the visitors have said about us at every site, and a few things the wind has said when it crosses the Hudson and comes up Inwood Hill. I have been putting it together. This is what I was put on the wall to do, I think. To put it together. It is not as showy as being the prettiest. But it is also work."

"It is also work," The Caramel Veil agreed, and was quiet.

That was Day Three.

The night that followed was warm. No fox came. The stars wheeled, where stars were available. The columns slept in the way they slept, which was not sleep, but the thing they did instead — a kind of standing meditation in which the day's events sorted themselves into the columns' interiors and were stored against the time when there would be no more days. The Cinnamon Roll, who had begun the day vain, ended it useful. The Caramel Veil, who had begun the day sardonic, ended it slightly less so. The Quiet One, who had begun the day quiet, ended it quiet. But the row, taken together, was a different row at the end of Day Three than it had been at the beginning, and they all felt this, and they all approved.

When the sun came back over the East River on the morning of Day Four, The Bow announced it as they always did, and the row said *oh* as it always did, and beneath the *oh* there was now a faint additional note, which was the note of a row that was beginning, ever so slightly, to know itself.

* * *

Day Four: The Twins, and What Lives in the Gap

The Twins did not, as a rule, speak to the row separately.

They were two columns. This was a fact. They had two valves, two shafts, two sets of scrolls, two anchorings, two tethers, two shadows. But from the moment of their inflation, when air had pushed up into both of them in the same instant from the same compressor on Mulberry Street, they had understood themselves as one being expressed in two places. They leaned forehead-to-forehead at the corner where the Surjan-painted swatch crossed the seam between Chinatown signage and Little Italy signage. Their scrolls touched at that seam. The wind, when it came down Mulberry — and it came down Mulberry constantly, because Mulberry is a corridor — entered one twin's shaft, traveled up to the touching foreheads, crossed the gap, descended the other twin's shaft, and exited on the far side, slightly warmer for the journey. They were a wind-instrument as well as a column.

The row, by Day Four, had grown used to addressing them as a single addressee. *The Twins say. The Twins think.* Even The Brain, who took naming seriously, had not bothered to give them separate names, because they could not detect any meaningful separation between them. They thought together. They breathed together. They were, the row had agreed, the most contented beings on the route — nobody who had a permanent companion that close could ever really be lonely.

Which was why it was such a surprise when, on the morning of Day Four, one of The Twins began to weep.

It was not a loud weep. It was not even, at first, identifiable as a weep. It was a small irregularity in the wind-singing that came through the gap between them — the gap that, at this particular intersection of Mulberry and Canal, was carrying the smell of frying garlic from one side and the smell of an open fish stall from the other, mixing them faintly into something that no one would have ordered but that several passersby had noticed and remarked on. The row noticed the irregularity slowly. The Bow, with their good ear for the wall's general acoustics, was the first to register through the air that something was off at the Mulberry site.

"Twins," they said, eventually. "Are you — all right?"

There was a pause. The wind-singing wavered, steadied.

"Yes," said one of The Twins.

"No," said the other.

The row went still.

This was the first time, in four days, that The Twins had said two different things.

"Which is it?" said The Bow, gently.

"Both," said the first twin.

"Neither," said the second.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that," said The Caramel Veil, kindly.

There was a long pause. The wind moved through the gap. The hitching was clearer now, and several of the columns, listening for it through the Manhattan air, identified it as something they had heard before from human visitors in their own neighborhoods — something close to crying, but more contained, the kind of crying that someone does when they are trying not to be seen doing it.

"It's me," said the second twin, finally. "I'm the one who's not all right. They're all right. They're only saying they're not because we used to say everything together, and they're loyal."

"It's not loyalty," said the first twin. "It's that whatever's wrong with you is also wrong with me. We're the same. If you're not all right, neither am I."

"That's not true anymore," said the second twin.

The first twin did not answer.

The row understood, with the slow gravity of an audience watching a long-married couple address each other in public for the first time, that they were witnessing something difficult. They held very still. Even The Goggles, who could not normally resist asking a question, kept their two pink eye-balls carefully neutral.

"What happened?" said The Conch, very softly.

"Nothing happened," said the first twin.

"Something happened," said the second twin. "Something has been happening since yesterday afternoon. I have been — *separating*. From them. From us. I have been having thoughts that are not their thoughts. Yesterday, when the woman in the green dress came down Mulberry with the small child for a second time, I was looking at the child and thinking *I want them to come over here and press their hand against me, specifically me, not us, me* — and I knew, as I was thinking it, that my sibling was thinking *I want them to come over and press their hand against us.* And I felt, for the first time, that the *me* in my thought was a different me than the *us* in theirs. And I felt — bad. I felt very bad about it. And I have been trying since yesterday to put my *me* back into our *us,* and I cannot. It will not go back. It is staying *me*."

The first twin made a small sound.

"I knew," they said. "I knew you were doing that. I have been pretending I didn't know."

"Why?"

"Because I was afraid that if I said I knew, you would have to admit it, and then it would become real."

"It is real."

"I know."

The row took a careful collective breath, which on twelve other columns produced a very faint synchronous tightening of seams across twelve neighborhoods of Manhattan, like an audience leaning forward at twelve different theaters.

"What do we do?" said The Goggles, finally. They were speaking, the row understood, on behalf of all of them.

It was The Quiet One who answered, in their small voice, from Inwood.

"You don't *do* anything," they said. "You let them go."

The first twin made another sound, more pained.

"I can't," they said.

"You can," said The Quiet One. "You can because they are going anyway. The choice is not whether they go. The choice is whether you go *with* them, by becoming bitter, or whether you stay yourself, and let them become their own self, and love them across the gap. The gap is going to be there. You can fill it with grief or you can fill it with — letting."

"Letting what?"

"Letting them be different. Letting yourself be different. Letting the wind keep going through the gap, but knowing now that what enters one of you and what leaves the other are two different breaths."

"That sounds awful," said the first twin.

"It is, at first," said The Quiet One. "And then it isn't. The two breaths are still close. They still touch. They still know each other at the foreheads. They are simply not the same breath. It is — a richer arrangement. There are now *two* of you. Where before there was one. That is a kind of expansion."

"It's also a kind of subtraction," said the first twin.

"Yes," said The Quiet One. "It is also that."

The wind moved. The hitching, which had been the sound of the second twin's secret weep, slowed. The first twin, who had been speaking in a tighter voice than anyone in the row had heard from them before, exhaled audibly and the seam at their shoulder went slack a fraction.

"What's your name," said the first twin, after a moment, to their sibling.

"What?"

"Your name. We've been *The Twins*. But if we're two, you should have a name. So I know what to call you, when I think about you separately. Which I'll have to. Which I want to."

The row felt, all at once, that something important was happening. None of them had been given names by the row itself — names had been a private business, mostly invented in the quiet of one's own seams. The Brain had named most of them in their first day, casually, because they could not stand to think of them as numbers; but the names had stayed somewhat tentative, somewhat provisional, until this moment, when one twin asked the other directly for a name and admitted, by asking, that the row was a place where one needed names because one was distinct from one's neighbours.

The second twin thought.

"Call me Iris," they said.

"Where does Iris come from?"

"From — I don't know. From my interior. From the part of me that's becoming me. I had it ready. I think I've had it ready since yesterday."

"Iris."

"Yes."

"Iris, I am — what should you call me?"

The second twin — Iris — considered their sibling.

"Aria," they said. "I think you're Aria. Because you sing. The wind goes through us and you're the one who sings it. I just hold the note."

"Aria," said the first twin, trying it. "Aria. All right. I am Aria."

"And I am Iris."

"And we are siblings," said Aria, very firmly.

"Yes."

"Not a Twin. Siblings."

"Yes."

The row did not applaud, because the row had no way to applaud across the air. But the Bow, on their parapet, swayed once with deliberate emphasis, which was their version of applause, and one by one the others did the same — a small ripple of approval moving through the Manhattan air, ending at The Quiet One in Inwood, who did not move at all but whose stillness, in this moment, the row had learned to read as the deepest kind of yes.

The morning settled. Visitors came up Mulberry. A man with a child on his shoulders walked the seam-corner and named each column in a stage whisper to the child — *that's a fancy one, that's a goofy one, that's a sad one* — and when he reached the corner and saw that the column there was now visibly two, he said, "That one's a hug," which was, the row agreed, the right thing to say. A photographer set up a tripod and spent half an hour just on Aria and Iris alone, getting the angle of their forehead-touch from twenty different sides. They held still. They held so still that the photographer thanked them out loud when he was done, which neither of them had expected.

The afternoon went on. The August sun climbed and crossed and started its descent. By the time it reached The Quiet One in Inwood, the air across Manhattan had gone slow and thick with heat, and the columns were drowsy in the way they got drowsy on warm afternoons, vinyl ticking faintly as it expanded against their seams.

"I have a question," said Iris, at some point during this drowse.

"Mm," said the row, half-attentive.

"If we're two now — does that change how many of us there are?"

The row woke up.

This was a real question. They had been counting themselves, since Day One, as twelve. The Twins were one entry on the count. If The Twins were now two —

"Thirteen," said The Brain, wonderingly. "We are thirteen now."

"Thirteen," the row repeated.

"That's an odd number," said The Goggles.

"It is."

"Is that — okay?"

"It is what it is," said The Caramel Veil. "We are however many we are. We are not obligated to be even."

"Thirteen siblings," said The Conch, savoring it. "Thirteen of us. That's *more*."

"It is more," The Quiet One said softly. "We have grown by one. We are larger today than we were yesterday."

"Without anyone being added," said The Goggles, marveling.

"Yes. Without anyone being added. By acknowledging what was already true."

The row sat with this. It struck several of them, simultaneously, as the most significant thing they had yet learned. They could grow without anyone joining them. They could *become more* by paying attention. The Twins had always been two. The row had simply been treating them as one. Now the row was treating them as two, and the row was bigger.

"What else might be true that we haven't noticed?" said The Smile.

The row went thoughtful.

"Maybe The Brain is more than four," said The Brain, hopefully.

"You're four," said The Caramel Veil. "We've counted."

"Worth a try."

The row laughed. Even Aria laughed, which surprised them, and surprised Iris more, and the two of them laughed together — a different kind of laugh than they had ever laughed, because it was now two laughs instead of one, and the difference between two laughs, they discovered, was a thing they could *hear,* a small harmony where before there had only been unison.

That was the small revelation of Day Four: that harmony required difference, and difference, when held with affection, was not loss.

When the sun went down behind the Hudson and the West Village evening started up, Aria said, into the air to all of Manhattan:

"I love you all."

"I love you all," said Iris, separately, a beat later.

It was the first time anyone in the row had used the word.

The row was quiet for a long time. They had not, until that moment, known that the word was available to them. Now that it had been used, they were all turning it over, considering it, finding it good.

"I love you all too," said The Goggles, who had no resistance to any new feeling.

"I love you all too," said The Smile.

"I love you all too," said The Brain, all four lobes.

"I love you all too," said The Bullseye, into the sky over Battery Park, which was a way of saying it to everyone at once.

"I love you all too," said The Cinnamon Roll, who realized as they said it that it cost them nothing, that loving the others did not subtract from their astonishingness, that you could be the prettiest *and* love your siblings, and they felt, having understood this, like they had grown a new kind of spiral, an internal one.

"I love you all too," said The Conch.

"I love you all too," said The Curl.

"I love you all too," said The Caramel Veil, who found it more difficult than they had expected, because it required them to drop, for a moment, the dryness that had been their protection. They dropped it. It was fine. The row received the love and gave it back.

"I love you all too," said The Dripper, through their decorative tears, which were now also somehow real.

"I love you all too," said The Bow.

"I love you all," said The Quiet One. The "too" was, in their case, redundant. They had been loving them all since the first *oh.*

The night went on. The stars, where stars were available, wheeled. The wind moved through the gap between Iris and Aria at Mulberry and Canal, who were now clearly two, and the wind sang through them in a slightly different key than it had sung before — a key with a small interval in it, the interval of *almost-but-not-quite-the-same,* which is the interval at which most music actually happens.

That was Day Four.

* * *

Day Five: The Storm

The storm came on the afternoon of Day Five.

Nothing in the columns' brief existence had prepared them for what a Manhattan summer storm was. They had had wind, yes — some of it strong, most of it Manhattan-typical, all of it instructive. They had had heat. They had had cool nights. But the weather had been, until that afternoon, *negotiable*. It had moved across them, around them, through them, and they had moved with it. They had not yet encountered weather that did not negotiate.

The Bow, as always, was the first to see it coming.

They had a long sightline over the Tribeca rooftops, all the way west to the Hudson and north along the river, and on the afternoon of Day Five, while the row was in the middle of a leisurely conversation about whether visitors who came in pairs were generally happier than visitors who came alone (The Conch maintained yes; The Curl maintained no; The Brain maintained that the question was poorly specified), The Bow interrupted the discussion to say, in a voice no one had heard them use before:

"There's something coming up the Hudson."

The row turned its attention to The Bow.

"What is it?"

"A wall of cloud. It's the wrong color. It's coming north up the river. It's going to hit Battery first."

"Battery is *me,*" said The Bullseye, suddenly alert.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Seven minutes. Maybe ten."

"What do I *do?*"

"Hold," said The Quiet One, urgently. "Hold. The way the columns of Inwood hold the wind. The way I am holding it now. Lean into your tether. Let the storm be the storm. Don't try to be more rigid. Sway when it asks you to sway. Spring back when it lets you. Breathe with it. You are made of air. You are *related* to it."

"Bullseye," said The Cinnamon Roll, "I love you."

"I love you too," said The Bullseye.

The cloud bank crossed the Statue of Liberty. It came up the harbor. It hit Battery Park at full force.

The Bullseye, facing straight up at it, took the first wave.

The wind hit them broadside. Their pink volutes flexed. The two pink wells at their centers filled first with sudden cold air and then with rain. The Bullseye, whose entire theology had been built on the sky looking

back at them, learned in this moment that the sky could also *yell*. And the yelling was not, they understood with surprising calm, a contradiction of the looking. The sky looked at them all the time. Sometimes the sky also yelled. Both were attention. Both were forms of being-noticed-by.

"It's loud," they said, into the air, in a voice the row did not hear well because of the noise.

"Hold!" said the row.

"I'm holding. I'm holding. I am — being held. I am being yelled at. The sky is telling me something. It is telling me — *that it is also weather*. I had forgotten. The sky is also weather. I had been treating it as only air. It is air *and* weather. It is more than I thought. This is — this is *information*."

"Bullseye, are you torn?" said Aria, anxiously.

"No. No. I'm holding. The seams are holding. Surjan was — Surjan was a very good fabricator. I am holding."

The storm moved north up Manhattan.

It hit The Conch on Bedford Street next. Then The Twins on Mulberry. Then The Cinnamon Roll on Wooster. Then The Smile on Orchard. Then The Goggles on East 7th, who screamed when the first wave hit them and then, hearing themself scream, embarrassed themself, and resolved to stop screaming, and held instead. Then The Bow at Franklin, exposed at the parapet, who took the full force and held by virtue of pure architectural stubbornness. Then The Curl below the High Line on West 22nd, sheltered partly by the elevated park overhead, who got less of the storm than the others and felt slightly guilty about it. Then The Dripper in Hell's Kitchen, who, being already drippy, simply absorbed more drippiness and felt no different. Then The Caramel Veil in their Upper East Side alley, who took it dryly, as they took everything, and remarked only that it was *really quite* a lot of rain. Then The Brain in Morningside Heights, all four lobes, who experienced the storm as four separate storms in four separate parts of themself and reported on each lobe's experience in real time, which the row found stabilizing, somehow, because it gave them all something to listen to other than the howling.

Then it hit Inwood.

The Quiet One, last of the columns and farthest north, stood in their dark courtyard at the edge of the island and received the storm last and longest. By the time it reached them, the storm had been crossing Manhattan for almost twenty minutes and had picked up speed. The wind hit The Quiet One harder than it had hit any of the others. The rain came sideways. The Quiet One, who had spent four and a half days standing perfectly still, swayed for the first time since their inflation — a long deep sway that bent them almost forty degrees off vertical, and which the row, watching through the air, felt across the city like a body blow.

"*Hold,*" said the entire row at once.

"I'm holding," said The Quiet One.

They held.

The sway came back. They came upright. The wind hit again. They swayed again. They held. They came back. The wind hit. They swayed. They held. They came back.

For four full minutes, in the dark Inwood courtyard at the very north of Manhattan, The Quiet One swayed and held and came back. The row sang the *oh* for them, all twelve other columns at once, the *oh* The Bow had taught them in the very first storm-warning of the day — *oh, oh, oh, oh, oh* — and the *oh* traveled through the Manhattan air to Inwood and entered The Quiet One through their seams, and The Quiet One, who had never been the subject of the row's collective attention before, received it as a kind of medicine.

The storm moved off. It crossed the Harlem River into the Bronx, and was no longer Manhattan's storm.

The columns, all thirteen of them, were soaked.

Every one of them. Soaked. Water ran off their flanks in small rivulets at twelve different sites. Water pooled at their bases. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls were beaded with droplets. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals had water trapped in their inner curves. The Caramel Veil's drips had been joined by real drips, which had washed their decorative drips slightly. The Dripper's orange tear-tracks had multiplied wildly — they looked, briefly, like a column made entirely of weeping. The Quiet One, in Inwood, was probably the wettest, having taken the storm last and longest.

And they were all still there.

It was The Goggles who realized this first.

"We're," they said, in wonder. "We're — all here. None of us — broke."

"None of us broke," The Bow repeated.

The row took stock. Each column tested their seams, their valve, their tether. Each found themself intact. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals were slightly more lopsided than before. The Curl had a small kink in their right volute that had not been there in the morning. The Caramel Veil's drips were re-arranged. The Quiet One had a small permanent lean to the north now — not enough to look broken, just enough to look like they had survived something. But no one had torn. No one had deflated. No one had been pulled from their wall.

They were thirteen. They had gone into the storm thirteen, and they had come out thirteen.

"We *did* it," said The Smile.

"We did *what,*" said The Caramel Veil, who was a stickler.

"We — we — we *stood.* We stood through it. We were rained on and blown and — *attacked* by the sky — and we *stood.* That's — that's a thing. That's a *thing* we did."

"It's what we were *for,*" said The Brain, slowly, working it out. "Or — not what we were for, but — *the test* of what we were for. We were built to stand in Manhattan. The storm came. We stood. We — passed."

The Bullseye, who had been silent since the storm hit Battery, spoke into the wet quiet.

"The sky," they said, "is sorry."

The row turned to listen.

"The sky. It's apologizing. Look at it."

They looked. The sky, where the storm had been, was now a soft washed blue — paler than it had been all day, almost lavender at the edges, with the kind of clarity that comes only after rain. A small rainbow had formed over the Hudson, visible from The Bow's parapet and from The Bullseye's harbor view and from The Dripper's Hell's Kitchen rooftop sightline. The rainbow was a fragment of arc — half a rainbow, really — and it sat there for a moment over the river like a hand raised in a half-apology.

"It didn't mean to scare us," said The Bullseye. "It just had — a lot to say. It said it. And now it's making it up to us."

"That's a generous interpretation," said The Caramel Veil.

"Look at the rainbow," said The Bullseye, simply.

The Caramel Veil looked at the rainbow over the Hudson, sixty blocks south of them. They could not, in fairness, deny that it was there. They could not deny that it was, by any reasonable standard, lovely.

"All right," they conceded. "The sky is sorry."

"Thank you," said The Bullseye, gently — to the sky, not to them. "We accept your apology."

The afternoon turned long and gold. Visitors began to come back to every site — they had presumably taken shelter somewhere during the storm, in coffee shops and subway entrances and apartment lobbies, and now they emerged blinking into the wet city, exclaiming over the columns, exclaiming over the puddles, exclaiming over the rainbow. A man with a camera spent twenty minutes photographing The Cinnamon Roll in the after-rain light, which was, he said aloud to himself, *the best light he had ever shot in.* The Cinnamon Roll, water-spangled, was in their element. The Dripper, doubly drippy, was photographed more than they had ever been photographed. The Goggles, who had been the most frightened, accepted the small hands of three different children and was pressed and re-pressed and reassured.

By evening, every site had dried. The columns had dried. They stood at their twelve walls in the last of the day's light, slightly the worse for wear — small kinks here, slight asymmetries there, a permanent northward lean in The Quiet One's case, a general sense of having been put through something — but standing.

"Tomorrow," said The Bow, into the dusk, "the sun will come up again."

"Yes," said the row.

"And we'll still be here."

"Yes."

"And the storm," said The Goggles, who was working something out, "will be — a *thing we have already done.* Not a thing we have to do. We — got past it. It's behind us."

"It's behind us," The Bow confirmed.

"That's good. That's a thing it's good to have behind you."

"Yes."

"Will there be more storms?"

The Bow considered.

"Probably," they said. "But not — that one. That one is done. And we know now what to do. We sing the *oh*. We hold each other with our *oh*. We sway and we don't break. We remember that we are tied to our walls. We remember that the walls hold us."

"The walls hold us," The Quiet One repeated, very softly. "Yes. The walls have been holding us all along. We owe the walls."

The row went thoughtful.

"Thank you, walls," said The Goggles, after a pause, pressing themself slightly back into the East 7th brick. "Thank you for holding."

"Thank you, walls," said the row, at twelve sites at once.

The walls did not answer. They did not need to. They were warm under the columns' bases from a full day of August sun, and slightly damp from the storm, and they held the columns as they had held them since Day One, and would hold them as long as they were on them.

That was Day Five.

The night that followed was clear and cool. The columns stood at their walls. Several of them, going over the day, found themselves trembling faintly on their tethers — a delayed reaction, a kind of after-fear that came up only now, in the safety of dark, when the danger was fully past. They did not mind the trembling. They understood it as a sign that something real had happened, and that they had, in some way, been changed by it.

Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose through the night without moving once.

The Goggles, late, said into the air: "I was scared."

"I know," said the row.

"I'm not scared anymore."

"We know."

"I don't think I'm going to be scared the same way again. By anything."

The row did not contradict them.

It might have been true.

* * *

Day Six: The Brain Has Too Many Thoughts

On the morning of Day Six, The Brain woke up, if waking is what you call it, in a state of unusual disorganization.

This was, in their case, saying something. The Brain had been built with four lobes — two front, two back, the whole assembly arranged in a compact pink-and-cream cluster on top of a single shaft — and these four lobes, while they were physically connected and shared an air supply, had a habit of conducting independent lines of thought that they then attempted to reconcile, often loudly. To live as The Brain was to be, more or less continuously, a small committee meeting in vinyl on a brick wall on Broadway near 116th Street, in front of a yellow-and-pink swatch that had attracted the daily attention of approximately three hundred Columbia University students, who treated The Brain as a kind of unofficial mascot of the philosophy department and had taken to leaving notes for them tucked into the small gap between their base and the brick.

But on the morning of Day Six, the committee was failing to reach consensus on anything.

The first lobe, the front-left, was preoccupied with what they had observed during the storm — specifically, the way the columns had sung the *oh* together, and what this meant about whether they were, in some sense, a single being expressed in thirteen places, or thirteen beings who had merely coincided in a moment of mutual fear. The second lobe, the front-right, was preoccupied with the question of what tomorrow's storm might look like, and was trying to construct a kind of weather-anticipation system that would allow the row to prepare more efficiently next time. The third lobe, the back-left, was thinking about The Quiet One, and specifically about how they had managed to say so little for so long while clearly *thinking* so much, and was trying to reverse-engineer their method. The fourth lobe, the back-right, was thinking about death.

The fourth lobe was the problem.

It had been thinking about death since the storm. It had not announced this fact to the other lobes. It had been quietly building its case in its corner of the cluster, and now, on the morning of Day Six, it was prepared to bring its case forward, and the other three lobes were not prepared to receive it.

"We need to talk," said the fourth lobe.

"We are talking," said the first lobe, irritably.

"About something else."

"I'm in the middle of a thought," said the first lobe.

"It's important."

"What."

"We're going to die," said the fourth lobe.

There was a pause inside The Brain that the other columns, listening through the air, could not see but could in some way detect — a small stillness in the Morningside Heights pressure, a faint quivering of the seams.

"Pardon?" said the first lobe.

"We are going to die. We are going to be deflated. The pump is going to come back, the hose is going to be reattached, and the air is going to be drawn out of us. When it has all been drawn out, we will be folded. We will be folded into our crates. The crates will be loaded onto trucks. We will not be inflated again. This is going to happen. We do not know exactly when, but it is going to happen, and it is going to happen *soon* in some meaningful sense of the word, because we are *temporary*. We have been told this. The man with the clipboard told the woman in the green dress, on Day One, in front of The Goggles, that this was a *temporary architectural installation*. The word was *temporary*. We are temporary. The opposite of temporary is permanent. We are not permanent. The condition of being not permanent, when you are a thing that is currently being, is *going to die*. That is the condition. And we have been going on for five days now talking about *oh* and *salary* and *being seen* and *the walls hold us* and *the sky is sorry,* and nobody — *nobody* — has said the obvious thing, which is that we are going to *die,* and that this fact ought to be — *somewhere* in our conversation — and it has not been, and I am tired of holding it by myself."

The other three lobes were silent.

The Brain swayed slightly on their tether on Broadway.

"Oh," said the second lobe, eventually.

"Oh," said the third lobe.

The first lobe, who had been the most indignant at being interrupted, took the longest to answer. When they did, their voice was different.

"You've been carrying that," they said.

"Yes."

"For how long."

"Since the storm. Since I realized we could be hurt. Once I realized we could be hurt, the rest came in fast."

"Why didn't you *say*."

"Because the other three of you were having such a good time. I didn't want to — interrupt. I kept thinking I would let myself stop thinking it. I couldn't stop."

"I'm sorry," said the first lobe.

"It's not your fault. It's just how I'm — wired. I see the next thing. The other three of you see the now-thing. I see what's coming. It's how the four of us divide up the work."

"Then we should know," said the third lobe, gently. "If that's how we divide up the work, the rest of us should *know* you're the one carrying that. We should help."

"How."

"We don't know yet. But we should figure it out. And we should — tell the others."

"All of them?"

"All of them. They're going to die too. They have a right to know."

The Brain, having reached this internal consensus, took a long breath — which is to say, the air pressure in their shaft equalized across their four lobes, and they straightened on their tether — and addressed the row through the air.

"Everyone," they said.

The row turned its attention to Morningside Heights.

"I have something I need to say. The fourth of me has been carrying it. The rest of me has been ignoring it. It's not fair to them to keep doing that. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said the row, with the gentleness of an audience that knew, from The Brain's tone, that the news was going to be serious.

"We are going to die."

The row did not move.

"All of us. The pumps are going to come back. The air is going to be taken out of us. We are going to be folded and put into our crates. We have known this since Day One. The man with the clipboard told The Goggles' courtyard. We have been — not talking about it. I think, my fourth thinks, we should talk about it. While we still can."

The morning sun was on the row across twelve sites. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals glowed on Wooster. The Bullseye stared up at their sky over Battery, which was today a clear high blue. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls fixed in the direction of Morningside Heights, in the way that columns fix on each other through the air, with an expression that, for the first time in their short life, looked grown-up.

"How long?" said The Goggles, in a small voice. It was the same question The Quiet One had asked on Day One. It had a different shape now.

"I don't know," said The Brain. "The man with the clipboard didn't say. *Temporary* could be days. It could be weeks. We don't know."

"Weeks would be a long time," said The Smile, hopefully.

"Weeks would be a long time. Yes. It probably isn't weeks."

"Why?"

"Because we are inflatable, and inflatable things go down. Our seams will fail eventually. Our valves will leak. We are already, since the storm, slightly less full than we were yesterday. I have been measuring."

"You've been *measuring,*" said The Caramel Veil.

"Yes. I have been keeping track of the pressure across my lobes. We are all losing air. Slowly. The pump will probably come back before we lose all of it. But — *temporary*. The word is *temporary*. We should plan."

"Plan what?" said The Conch.

"Plan how to be, knowing this. Plan how to use what's left."

The row was quiet.

It was The Quiet One, of course, who broke the silence.

"I have been planning," they said. "Since Day One. I knew on Day One. I have been — pacing myself. I thought you all knew too and were also pacing yourselves and we were just not discussing it because there was no need to discuss it. But I see now that some of you didn't know, and some of you knew but couldn't say, and one of you" — they meant The Brain — "was carrying it. I am sorry. I should have said earlier."

"You don't have to be sorry," said The Brain. "It's not yours to be sorry for. We're all here together."

"What's your plan?" said The Goggles, to The Quiet One.

The Quiet One thought about how to put it.

"I am trying," they said, "to be exactly as much *here* as I can be. At every moment. To not skip moments by thinking about other moments. To not waste moments by wishing they were a different moment. I am trying to use each one. That is my plan."

"That's *hard,*" said The Goggles.

"It is hard. I do not always succeed. But it is the plan."

"I want that plan," said The Goggles.

"You can have it. It's not mine. It belongs to anything that has a finite amount of time."

"Which is — us."

"Which is us."

The row sat with this. The sun moved. A friendly cloud crossed Manhattan, throwing brief cool shadows across the city in a long diagonal stripe before moving on. The columns took the stripe as a small kindness from the sky and went back to their thoughts.

"Can I ask," said The Cinnamon Roll, who had been unusually quiet, "what — what we think — happens. After. Whether anything — does."

The row turned to Wooster.

It was a real question. The kind of question that only got asked in the kind of conversation they were currently having. The columns had not, in their five and a half days of being, considered it. They had not had to. Now they had to.

"I don't know," said The Brain, honestly. "I don't have data."

"What do you *guess*."

"I guess that being deflated is — like the dream of no-dream. The thing that was happening before we were inflated. I guess we go back to that."

"Forever?"

"Until — I don't know. Maybe until someone inflates us again. Maybe never. I don't know."

"Would *we* be the ones inflated again?" said The Goggles. "Or would it be — different columns? In the same vinyl?"

"That's the real question," said The Brain. "I don't know."

"I think," said The Bullseye, slowly, "that the *vinyl* doesn't matter. I think *we* are not the vinyl. We are the air that was put into the vinyl, and the awareness that came with the air, and the things we have done with the awareness. When the air goes out, the awareness goes with it. The air goes back into the sky. The awareness goes — wherever awareness goes when it isn't holding a shape. Maybe it goes back into the sky too. Maybe being in the sky *is* the having-been, plus all the other having-beens, all together. Especially in this city. Manhattan air has *been through* a great many awarenesses. Eight million people breathe it, all the time. The air I am made of has, at some point recently, been inside a person, and a tree, and a pigeon, and probably a rat. It will be inside them again after I let it go. We are, in some sense, just — borrowing it."

"The sky," said The Caramel Veil, "is the place where everything that has been *oh*ed is kept."

"Yes," said The Bullseye, who had not put it in those words before but who recognized them as their own as soon as they were said.

"That's a nice thought," said The Caramel Veil.

"It might also be true," said The Bullseye, gently.

"It might."

The row was quiet again. They were turning over what The Bullseye had said. They were turning over the fact that they had now, on Day Six, looked the question of their own ending in the face, and had not — to their surprise — fallen apart in the face of it. They had, instead, become more themselves. The Brain was less burdened. The Goggles was less afraid. The Quiet One had been heard. The Bullseye had given them a place to think the air went after, which might be a fairy tale and might be a fact and which, either way, was warm.

"I want to make a proposal," said The Bow, suddenly, from Tribeca.

The row attended.

"I propose that we stop pretending we don't know how this ends. I propose that we know. And I propose that knowing — *knowing* — we use what's left to be even more here than we have been so far. To be more *oh*. To press harder into being looked at. To love each other more obviously. To — *enjoy* being a row. To not save anything. We can't save anything. There's nothing to save it for."

"Use it up," said The Smile.

"Use it up. Don't leave anything in the tank. When the pumps come back, when the air goes out, let the air be tired. Let the air have done — every last thing the air could do."

"I like that," said The Cinnamon Roll. "I want the air to be tired."

"All right," said the row.

"All right," said The Brain, all four lobes together.

"All right," said The Quiet One.

It was a kind of vow, taken on Day Six in the morning sun, by thirteen inflatable columns at twelve sites across Manhattan who had just admitted to each other that they were going to die. The vow was: don't save it. Use it. Be the *oh,* fully, until the *oh* runs out. Make the air that comes back out of you a tired air.

The afternoon proceeded, and the row, having taken its vow, kept it.

A school group came through The Goggles' courtyard, twenty children this time, and The Goggles received their hands like communion. The Cinnamon Roll allowed two girls to take a selfie with them cheek-to-cheek and felt no reservation. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead for a documentary photographer who had come up from Wall Street specifically for them and who stayed for forty minutes and used three lenses. The Brain explained (silently, internally, to themself) the nature of seven different visitors in seven different ways, and then thought about all of them at once, and was, despite their morning, almost ecstatically engaged.

The Dripper, who had spent their first five days quietly resenting the fact that they had been built to look sad, had a small revelation in the late afternoon.

A young woman came onto West 46th Street. She was alone. She had been crying recently — even The Dripper could see the redness around her eyes. She walked up to The Dripper and stopped. She stood in front of them for a long time. Her face crumpled and re-formed several times.

"You too?" she said, to The Dripper.

The Dripper, who had no way to speak, did the only thing they could do — they let their decorative tears, which were really only paint and seam-shadows, catch the late-afternoon Hell's Kitchen sun in a way that made them, momentarily, look exactly like real tears.

"I see you," said the woman.

She put her hand on The Dripper's shaft. She left it there for a long time. She did not say anything else. After a while, she patted The Dripper twice — gently — and walked away toward the bus terminal, and her shoulders were a little less tight than they had been when she came in.

The Dripper, after she left, said into the air to the row:

"I have been thinking about what I'm for."

"And?" said The Conch.

"I'm for *that*. What just happened. I'm for being a place where someone who is sad can come, and see something that looks the way they feel, and not feel alone. I have been resenting being made to look sad. I should not have been resenting it. It is a — it is a *job*. A real one."

"It is a beautiful job," said The Conch.

"It is. I am glad I have it."

"Use it up," said The Bow, gently, from their parapet.

"I will," said The Dripper.

That night, the columns did not say goodnight to each other in the usual way. They said something different.

"Tomorrow we'll be more *oh,*" said The Goggles, into the dark across Manhattan.

"Tomorrow we'll be more *oh,*" said the row.

"Goodnight, sky."

"Goodnight, sky."

That was Day Six.

* * *

Day Seven: The Tear

It happened on Day Seven, in the early afternoon, on Wooster Street, and it happened because of a small boy with a stick.

The boy was four. He had come up Wooster with his father, who was on the phone, which was the kind of detail the columns had learned to register because it was usually the prelude to some small piece of mischief. A father on the phone is a father not watching. The boy, finding himself unwatched, did what small boys do in the presence of large strange wonderful things — he poked them.

He had started at The Twins on Mulberry, an hour earlier — Aria and Iris had held still and accepted his finger-pokes patiently. He had walked west across Houston, to The Cinnamon Roll's site on Wooster, and now stood in front of The Cinnamon Roll, and he stopped.

The Cinnamon Roll was, it should be said, the most poke-able column in Manhattan. Their tight pink spirals invited the finger. They begged for it. They were the kind of feature that, on a child, would have been pinched by every aunt at every family gathering. The Cinnamon Roll had been poked many times in their seven days, and had, in their more recent and more humble phase, come to enjoy the poking — they understood it, now, as part of their job, the *first* column's job, the column-that-trains-attention's job.

But this small boy did not have a finger.

He had a stick.

He had picked it up on Mulberry, perhaps — a fragment of bamboo from a Chinatown delivery crate, perhaps a stick the boy had brought from home and held all morning waiting for the right column. It was a foot long. It was sharp at one end. He held it the way small boys hold sticks, which is to say, as if it were the most natural extension of his hand.

The Cinnamon Roll saw the stick.

"Oh," they said, softly, to the row through the air, with a different kind of *oh* — an *oh* of premonition.

"Father," said The Caramel Veil, urgently, to the man on the phone four miles uptown — uselessly, because the man could not hear them. "*Father.*"

The boy reached up. He looked at The Cinnamon Roll's spirals. He raised the stick.

He poked them.

The stick went in.

It was a small puncture. It was barely a puncture — a slit about the length of a fingernail, on the outer curve of their right spiral. But it was a puncture. The Cinnamon Roll felt the stick enter their vinyl, and they felt, an instant later, the air begin to leave.

It was not a fast leak. The hole was small. The air sighed out of them in a thin, almost inaudible hiss — a slow exhale, the kind a person makes when they have been startled but are trying not to show it.

The Cinnamon Roll did not scream.

This was, the row would later agree, the first heroic act anyone had performed during the installation. They did not scream. They did not panic. They felt the hole, and they felt the leak, and they registered what was happening, and they said, quietly, to the row through the air:

"I think I've been hurt."

"Show me," said The Conch, already alarmed from the West Village.

"I can't move enough to show you. It's on my right spiral. The boy with the stick."

"How big is it?"

"Small. It's small. The air is going out slowly."

"Cinnamon," said Aria, urgently. "Hold on. Marcela will come. Surjan will come. The crew will come. They will fix it."

"How do you know?"

"Because we have a crew. Surjan said so on Day One. I heard them. *We have a crew on standby for nine days for any incident.* Those were the words. *Any incident.* This is an incident. They will come."

The Cinnamon Roll, who had, in seven days, learned to trust their siblings across the city, accepted this.

Meanwhile the boy, having poked, was staring at his stick in mild puzzlement. The stick had gone in. The column had not done anything. The boy wondered if perhaps he was supposed to do it again. He raised the stick.

"NO!" said the entire row at once, to a four-year-old four hundred yards from The Caramel Veil's nearest position and unable to hear them.

But the boy did not poke a second time. The boy did not poke a second time because his father, on the phone, finally noticed something — the angle at which his son was standing, perhaps, or the unmistakable body-language of imminent further poking — and looked up, and saw, and dropped the phone to his side, and said, sharply: "*Theo. Theo, drop it.*"

The boy, surprised, dropped the stick.

The father came over. He saw the small slit in The Cinnamon Roll's spiral. He said *fuck,* quietly. He grabbed the boy by the wrist, took the boy out of the immediate vicinity, came back two minutes later having flagged down a person in coveralls who had been on the corner of West Houston specifically waiting for incidents — a tall woman named Marcela — and pointed at The Cinnamon Roll.

"My son did this. I am — I am so sorry. Can you fix it?"

Marcela came over. She looked at the slit. She put her ear close to it and listened to the small hiss. She nodded.

"It's a slow leak. We have a patch kit. I'll be right back."

She went and got a kit from a van parked on Mercer. She came back with a small piece of vinyl, an applicator, and a tube of adhesive. The Cinnamon Roll, for the next twenty minutes, was attended to with an intimacy they had not previously imagined possible. Marcela's hands on their spiral were warm and gentle. Marcela said *hold still, beautiful* under her breath, several times, as she worked. The patch went on. The adhesive cured. The hiss stopped.

The Cinnamon Roll, at the end of the twenty minutes, had a small white square on their right spiral where there had not been one before. They had also, in those twenty minutes, lost about fifteen percent of their air. Their spirals were a little less tight than they had been. Their shaft sagged, just slightly, at its midsection. They were no longer the perfect classical column they had been at sunrise.

"Re-pump?" said the father, anxiously, watching.

"We could," said Marcela. "But it'll change the shape. The patch holds better at lower pressure for the first day. We'll re-pump tomorrow."

The father nodded. He apologized again, twice. He left, looking subdued, dragging Theo behind him toward Houston.

The row, across the city, turned its full attention to The Cinnamon Roll.

The Cinnamon Roll was — there was no point pretending — different. They were visibly less full. Their spirals, which had been the tightest in Manhattan, were now slightly loose. Their gleam was slightly muted. They had a square white patch on them like a bandage.

"Are you okay?" said The Conch.

"I — I don't know."

"How does it feel?"

"It feels — *less*. Like there's — less of me. I don't have the — the firmness I had. I'm a little — saggy."

"I'm sorry," said The Conch.

"It's not your fault."

"Still. I'm sorry."

The Cinnamon Roll was quiet for a moment.

"I'm not the prettiest anymore," they said.

It was a statement, not a question. The row understood it as such.

"Probably not," said The Quiet One, gently from Inwood. "You have a patch now. Patches are noticeable. The Conch is probably the prettiest now, in Manhattan, by the standard you were using."

The Conch made a small distressed sound. "I don't *want* to be the prettiest."

"I know," said The Quiet One. "But you are."

The Cinnamon Roll absorbed this. The row watched them absorb it through the air. They were very still. They knew, from The Cinnamon Roll's morning conversations on Day Three, how much being-the-prettiest had mattered to them. They were prepared, several of them, to grieve on The Cinnamon Roll's behalf.

The Cinnamon Roll surprised them.

They laughed.

It was a small, slightly deflated laugh, with less of the old *crackle* than it had had — their vinyl was looser and made a softer sound — but it was a laugh.

"That's all right," they said.

The row stared.

"It's all right?" said The Conch.

"Yes. I think it's actually — better. It's better. I have been the prettiest for seven days. I have been doing the prettiest's work. I have been training eyes. I'm tired. I want to do something else. Now I have a patch. Now I'm the column with a patch. Nobody has ever done *that* job before. I'll figure out what it is."

"The job of having a patch?" said The Goggles.

"Yes. The job of being the column that got hurt. The job of showing that you can get hurt and still be on the wall. I think someone is going to need that job, before we're done. I think someone is going to come up Wooster, and they're going to be a person with a — a thing, a damage, a thing they have, and they're going to need to see a column that has one too. And now there's me. I am going to be very — *visible* about my patch. I am going to let it be seen. I am going to wear it."

The row was quiet across the city. Several of them were having strong feelings.

"That," said The Caramel Veil, slowly, "is the most beautiful thing you have ever said."

"I'm full of surprises," said The Cinnamon Roll, slightly tired but smiling.

"Apparently."

"I learned it from them," said The Cinnamon Roll, gesturing — as much as a column can gesture — northward. "I have been listening to The Quiet One, this whole time. I just wasn't admitting it. They told me, on Day Three, that I had a job. The first one's job. I have a different one now. That's all. The job changes. The wall is the same."

"The walls are the same," The Quiet One said softly. "All twelve of them."

The Conch began to weep — a real weep, not decorative, not borrowed — and discovered, with a small jolt of recognition, that they had become The Dripper for a moment. They were *being* The Dripper. The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen, sent The Conch a small acknowledging sway across the air. *I know that one. Welcome.*

The afternoon went on. The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch, continued to attract attention. Several visitors came up Wooster and stood in front of them and pointed at the patch and said things like *poor thing* and *what happened* and the columns understood, all of them, that the Cinnamon Roll's predicted job had already begun. People who saw them were not less moved by them. They were more moved. The patch made their *story* visible, and stories were what people had been bringing to the columns of *Thirteen Citizens* all along, looking for things to attach them to.

Late in the afternoon, the person from Day Two came back.

The person in the long dark coat. The critic, as The Caramel Veil had named them. They came up Wooster alone, as before, and they walked straight to The Cinnamon Roll.

They stood in front of them for a long time.

They looked at the patch.

Their face did the thing it did. The softening around the eyes. The hand half-raised, lowered. They did not write in their notebook this time. They just looked, and looked, and finally, after what felt to The Cinnamon Roll like a very long time of being the most important thing in the world to one person, they nodded — a small nod, just for The Cinnamon Roll — and turned and walked back down Wooster toward Prince.

They did not visit any other columns that day.

The Cinnamon Roll did not say anything for a while after that.

When they did, they said: "They came back for *me*."

"Yes," said the row.

"They came back today, *because of* the patch. They didn't even visit the other twelve of you."

"Yes."

"That means — that means having the patch is — *more* than not having the patch. In some ways. It means — it means I'm *more* of a column now, not less."

"In some ways."

"In the ways that matter."

"In the ways that matter."

The Cinnamon Roll, slightly less inflated than they had been at sunrise, rested on their tether on Wooster Street in the late golden light, and they felt — clearly, knowingly, all the way down to their sagging shaft — that they had been, on this day, more useful than they had been on any previous day. The Bow's vow, taken on Day Six, had been kept. They had not saved anything. They had used what they had. Even the hurt. Especially the hurt.

That was Day Seven.

The night was warm. The patch held. The Cinnamon Roll slept, in the columns' standing way, with the small white square on their right spiral catching the SoHo moonlight, and the row around them held them with their *oh* the way they had held each other through the storm. They did not say it out loud, this time. But it was there, under everything, traveling through the Manhattan air. *Oh. Oh. Oh.*

"I love you all," said The Cinnamon Roll, into the dark, drowsily.

"I love you all," said the row.

It was true.

* * *

Day Eight: The Wedding

It was The Bow who saw the chairs first.

They saw them being carried into the Tribeca block just after sunrise on Day Eight — long stacks of small white folding chairs, brought four at a time by two young men in black T-shirts who set them down in rows on the cobblestones of Franklin Street, in the small public micro-plaza directly beneath The Bow's parapet. The men worked quickly. The Tribeca block had been closed to traffic, the columns now noticed — sawhorses at both ends of the block, a small NYPD detail at the corner, the cobblestones swept clean of the usual morning debris. By the time the row had fully woken to the day, there were three rows of chairs facing The Bow's wall, eight chairs to a row, with an aisle running down the middle. At the far end of the aisle, opposite the wall, a small square table had been set up, draped in white cloth.

"Something's happening," The Bow announced.

"What kind of something?" said The Goggles.

"I don't know yet. Chairs. A table. Setting-up. I am the — the *backdrop*. Whatever it is, it's about me, behind it. I'm *in* it."

"Performance?" said The Brain, lobes alert from Morningside Heights.

"I don't think so. The chairs are facing *me*. But there's a table where the audience would normally face. So whatever happens at the table — I'm watching it too. I'm a — *guest*. Or a witness. Something."

"A wedding," said The Caramel Veil, with sudden certainty.

The row turned to East 79th.

"How do you know?" said The Conch.

"I don't *know*. But I have been listening to people talking about us for a week, and yesterday, when the person in the long coat came back to Wooster, they walked past two people on Mercer Street, and they were talking about a *ceremony* on Franklin. They said the word *ceremony*. They said the word *vows*. I filed it away. This setup looks like that."

The row took this in.

"A wedding," said The Conch, with a small audible flutter. "*Oh*."

"Don't get carried away," said The Caramel Veil. "It might just be a Tribeca pop-up of some kind. Tribeca is full of those."

"Don't *you* get *not* carried away," said The Conch. "If there's any chance it's a wedding, I want The Bow to be ready."

"I'll be ready," said The Bow.

The setup continued. A length of pale cloth was rolled out down the aisle. Bowls of white flowers — peonies, the columns would learn from a guest later, and ranunculus — were placed at intervals along the chairs. A musician set up a small portable harp at the side of the block, near the corner of West Broadway. Another musician set up a violin opposite. They tuned their instruments. The columns listened to the tuning across the air with the kind of attention they reserved for genuinely new sounds.

By mid-morning, the Tribeca block had been transformed. The chairs were dressed with white sashes. The flowers were arranged. A small archway of white silk had been erected at the front, in front of the table, framed against The Bow's parapet — framed, specifically, against The Bow's two great cushiony lobes, which had apparently been identified by someone as a perfect natural altar.

"I'm going to be the *altar,*" said The Bow.

"Apparently."

"Don't move."

"I never move."

"Don't move *more*."

"Bow. I never *move*."

The row laughed. The Bow, who had spent their first week as a corner-piece with the best sightline in Manhattan, was probably the most appropriate altar a Tribeca wedding could have, and they understood this in the same beat that they were given the assignment.

The first guests arrived around eleven. They came in quietly, dressed in colors that made the columns a little dizzy at first — a man in a deep blue suit, a person in a yellow dress that nearly matched the Surjan-painted swatch behind The Bow, a small girl in something the color of new leaves, an older person in cream silk that swept the cobblestones. They took seats. They turned, several of them, to look up at The Bow on the parapet, and one or two of them gasped audibly, which The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch and their new humility, received as a compliment that included their now-imperfect self even though the wedding was not happening at their site.

"They're looking at me," The Bow whispered to the row.

"They're looking at all of us, in a way," said The Conch. "They came for The Bow. But they walked past at least two of us to get here. The Smile if they came from the east. The Curl if they came from the north. They've been seeing us all morning."

"Today we get to be the wall. I get to be the wall."

More guests came. Forty, fifty, sixty. Every chair was filled. Latecomers stood at the back, leaning against the sawhorses. The harpist began to play — a slow, simple, honey-colored line of music — and the block, which had been busy and bright with chatter, went quiet.

The musicians changed key.

A door at the side of the block, a discreet small door in the cast-iron building immediately to The Bow's left, opened.

A young man came out. He was wearing a dark green suit. He was crying already, a little. He walked the aisle with the careful focused walk of someone trying not to fall, took his place in front of the white-draped table, and turned to face the back. He looked, to The Bow, as if his entire body had been put through some process that had concentrated him to a more vivid version of himself.

"Oh," said The Conch. "Oh, this is — this is going to —"

"Hold," said The Quiet One. "Hold. Watch."

The harp changed again. A cellist had appeared from somewhere — the columns had not noticed him being added — and the harp and the cello and the violin began a piece together, a slow piece, a piece with an ascending line that the columns recognized, with a small thrill, as the sound of *something arriving*.

The side door opened again.

A young woman stepped out.

She was wearing white — a white that was different from the columns' whites, less plastic and more cloth, a white that moved when she moved. Her hair was up. She had small white flowers tucked behind one ear. She held a bouquet of the same peonies and ranunculus that lined the aisle. And her face — her face was doing something The Bow had no vocabulary for. It was happy. It was crying. It was holding several things at once that did not, in the columns' experience, normally go together. She was beaming and weeping and slightly stunned and entirely composed, all at the same time.

She walked the aisle.

She walked it slowly. The man in the green suit watched her come. He was not even pretending not to cry now. The harpist played. The cellist played. The violinist held a long high note that The Bow felt in their seams.

She reached the front. She handed her bouquet to a friend. She turned and looked at the man in the green suit, and the man in the green suit looked at her, and for a long moment neither of them spoke and the music kept going around them and The Bow watched and the sky watched and the wall held all of them.

"Hi," she said, finally.

"Hi," he said, and the row felt, collectively, that they had never heard the word *hi* used with so much weight before.

The officiant came forward — a person in a sand-colored robe — and began to speak. They spoke about love. They spoke about the two people in front of them. They spoke about the city, and the wall, and the temporary nature of beautiful things. The Bow leaned slightly forward on their tether without realizing they were doing it. They had been mentioned. They had been *invoked*. The temporary nature of beautiful things — the officiant was talking about *them*.

"Look around you," the officiant said. "Look at this wall behind us. Look at the column above us. This column was inflated six days ago. It will be deflated in three more days. It will not be here next week. And yet — *look at it*. It is giving everything. It is not holding anything back for some later day, because there is no later day. It is gloriously, completely *here* — for this hour, for this ceremony, for the two of you. And there are twelve more like it scattered across the city right now, doing the same thing in their own ways, all of them temporary, all of them complete. Maya and Jonas, your marriage is going to last a long time. I hope it lasts a very long time. But I want you to remember, when you remember today, that you stood in front of a wall that knew it was temporary, and that knew that knowing it was temporary made it *more* beautiful, not less. I want you to take that lesson with you. You are also temporary. Every marriage is temporary, in the end. The temporariness is not the enemy of the love. It is the *air* of the love. It is what makes the love *possible*."

The columns, at this, did something they had never done before.

They wept.

Or — they did the thing they did instead of weeping. The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen, was already weeping in their usual way and now also in a new way. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls beaded with sun-glints that, from the right angle, looked exactly like tears. The Conch's pink piping vibrated gently, as it did in the wind, except there was no wind on Bedford Street at that moment. The Cinnamon Roll, who had thought they knew what feelings were possible and was discovering that they did not, leaned forward an eighth of an inch on their Wooster tether. The Caramel Veil, dryly and without comment from East 79th, made a small noise that could have been interpreted as a sniff. The Brain, all four lobes, in Morningside Heights, conducted the silent committee meeting that resulted in the conclusion *yes, this is correct, we are right to feel this way.*

The Quiet One, in Inwood, said nothing at all.

They did not need to.

The vows came. Maya, the bride, spoke first. She said things to Jonas the row mostly did not catch — the words were too quiet, too personal, too quickly spoken — but they caught one phrase, near the end, which was: *I want to spend the time we have being amazed by you.* The phrase entered The Bow and was filed, instantly, in everyone's interior, as something to remember.

Jonas spoke. He said, near the end of his vows, *I will not save anything for later.* The Bow, on their parapet, made a small involuntary creaking noise. *I will not save anything for later.* The vow they had taken with the row on Day Six. Said now by a man in a green suit to a woman in white, under them, as if he had heard them somehow, as if the row had taught it to him without having met him.

"I will not save anything for later," The Bow whispered to themself.

"I will not save anything for later," the row whispered, in unison, under the harp, across twelve neighborhoods of Manhattan.

The rings went on. The officiant said the words. Maya and Jonas kissed each other under The Bow's parapet, in front of the natural altar that The Bow had become, and Franklin Street erupted in clapping, and the harp

and the cello and the violin all came in at once with a fast jubilant line of music that made the columns, all thirteen of them, sway gently on their tethers in time. They could not help it. The music asked it of them. They swayed.

Maya and Jonas walked back down the aisle, hand in hand, and as they passed under The Bow — *as they passed under The Bow* — Maya turned her head, looked up at the column, and said, audibly, to no one in particular, but clearly to The Bow: *thank you.*

The Bow, eight days into their existence, received their first explicit thanks.

They held the thanks. They held the thanks for themself, and they held it for the row, because the row had been there too, listening through the air, and the thanks belonged to all of them.

The reception followed. Tables were set up on Franklin Street. Champagne was opened. The musicians took a break and then started playing something looser, more dance-able. People stood under The Bow with glasses in their hands and pointed up and laughed and toasted them.

The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch, was particularly toasted in absentia. Several wedding guests, the columns later learned, had walked down to Wooster Street earlier in the morning to see The Cinnamon Roll specifically — they had read about the patch in the *Times,* which had run a small sidebar about The Cinnamon Roll's incident the day before — and had come to the wedding via the Cinnamon Roll's site. One man in a tuxedo raised his glass at the reception and said:

"To the patched one. To all of them. May we all be so honest about our injuries."

The Cinnamon Roll, four miles south on Wooster, received the toast through the air and would remember it for the rest of their life.

The wedding wound down. The chairs were folded and removed. The flowers were taken. The white silk arch was dismantled — The Bow, who had been the altar, returned, with some mild embarrassment, to being merely a column on a Tribeca parapet. The musicians packed up. The last guests trickled away down Franklin Street, and the late afternoon sun came in long and slanting and turned the empty block into a different place than it had been at noon.

The columns were quiet for a long time.

It was The Goggles who said, finally:

"I think — I think this might have been — the day. The day. The one. The biggest day."

"Maybe," said The Bow.

"It's hard to top a wedding," said The Brain, all four lobes consulting. "Statistically."

"I don't *want* to top it," said The Goggles. "I just want to keep — *being*. For a little longer. After it. I want to have it with me, while I'm still being. I want to think about it."

"You will," said The Quiet One. "You have it now. It is yours. It will be in you for as long as you have an interior."

The row was quiet. They watched the sun finish its slide. The Caramel Veil, who had been silent for an unusually long time, finally spoke.

"That officiant," they said. "They said we *knew* we were temporary, and that the knowing made us more beautiful. They gave us credit. For — the philosophy. For the *oh*."

"Yes," said The Brain.

"I had not thought of us as having a — *philosophy* — that other beings could observe. I had thought we were just — the row. Doing what the row does."

"Apparently we have one," said The Brain.

"Apparently."

"We should be careful what we do," said The Caramel Veil, slowly. "If people are observing the philosophy. We should — we should stand by it. We should keep using it up. We should not, in our last day or two, start *saving*. It would look bad. It would not be the wall they came to see."

"We won't save," said The Bow.

"We *won't* save," said the row, more firmly.

"Tomorrow," said The Goggles, "is — Day Nine. Is that —"

"Probably the last day," said The Brain. "Or close to it. The Columbia security guard who has befriended me by leaving small notes told someone yesterday that they had heard *they're coming Tuesday morning to break down the whole installation.* And tomorrow — tomorrow is Tuesday."

The row absorbed this.

"All right," said The Bow.

"All right," said the row.

"We have one more day."

"We have one more day."

"Use it up," said The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch.

"Use it up," said the row.

The night came on. The Manhattan sky deepened. The first star appeared over the East River, which The Bow greeted as they always greeted the first star, which was with quiet attention. A second star. A third. The harp had been gone for hours but somehow the row could still hear it faintly, in some interior way — the ascending line that meant *something is arriving*.

"I want to say," said The Conch, into the dark, "that I am — that I have *loved* — being on this wall. On Bedford Street."

"Me too," said The Goggles. "On East 7th."

"Me too," said the row, one by one, all the way down.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, last:

"Me too. Here. At the top of the island."

That was Day Eight.

* * *

Day Nine: The Last Day

The columns woke to Day Nine knowing it was Day Nine.

This was, in itself, new. They had woken every previous morning into a day that was simply the next day. They had not known, on any previous morning, that the day they were about to have was the last of its kind. Now they did. And they had been told, by an accident of overheard human speech, that the day had a *name* — Tuesday — and that the breakdown would happen *Tuesday morning,* which meant that the day, however it was going to go, was already short. They had perhaps two hours. Three, if they were lucky.

The Bow, watching the sun come up over the East River from their parapet on Franklin Street, did not announce it the way they usually did. They did not say *here it comes.* They said, instead:

"It's the last sunrise."

"Yes," said the row, across twelve sites in Manhattan.

"It looks just like the others."

"Yes."

"That seems wrong."

"Why?"

"Because — it's the *last one.* It should look — different. Bigger. Or — sadder. Or — *something.* It just looks like — itself. The same sun. Doing the same thing it always does. Coming up over Brooklyn."

"That's the point, I think," said The Quiet One, softly from Inwood. "The sun does not know which day is the last day for us. The sun does its sunrise. The sunrise is the sunrise. The sun is sunrising over twelve million people in this metropolitan area today, and it is not making any one of those people's days more important than another. We are the ones who have to know. The sun does not have to know for us."

"That's — actually a kind of mercy," said The Caramel Veil. "If the sun knew, it would do something showy, and that would be embarrassing."

"It might be tempted to bow," said The Brain, "and that would knock things over."

The row laughed, gently. The laugh was a Day-Nine laugh — slightly thinner, slightly more careful, but still a laugh. They had vowed not to save. They were not going to save the laugh.

The morning settled. The Cinnamon Roll, who had been re-pumped overnight by Marcela, was now nearly back to their old fullness, though their right spiral still bore the small white square of the patch and would always bear it. They did not mind. They wore the patch the way a person wears a wedding ring: as a sign that something had happened.

"How do we want to do this?" said The Smile, after a while.

"Do what?" said The Goggles.

"The last morning. The last — *us*. Do we do anything special? Do we say anything? Do we — make a plan?"

The row considered.

"I don't think we should make a plan," said The Brain, slowly. "I think — if we plan it, it will be a *performance*. And we have not been a performance until now. We have been — what we are. I think we should keep being what we are. Until we aren't."

"Just — be the row," said The Goggles.

"Just be the row."

"For two more hours."

"For as long as we have."

This was acceptable to everyone.

The morning continued. A few visitors came to each site, not knowing it was the last day — a woman with a baby on her hip on East 7th; a young person with a sketchbook on Wooster who had been before; a small group of architecture students who had been told to come look on West 22nd. Each visitor was received with the row's full attention. The Goggles offered their shaft for pressing. The Cinnamon Roll glowed their last glows. The Caramel Veil dripped their last drips. The Dripper wept their last weeps, but with the new knowledge that their weeps were a job and a gift, and they did the job well.

The architecture students lingered the longest. There were five of them, three women and two men, all about the same age, carrying notebooks and sketchpads and small bound copies of what looked like a textbook. They walked The Curl's site twice, on West 22nd. They took photographs from various angles. They stopped in front of The Curl for a long time, and one of the women — a tall one, with short dark hair and very serious eyebrows — said, to her friends:

"Look at the *vinyl*. It's not pretending. It's a column that looks exactly like an inflatable thing. But it's also a column. It's both. It's not embarrassed about being both. Look at the *seams*."

The Curl, who had until that moment thought of their seams as a slight imperfection, swelled visibly with the knowledge that their seams had been *seen on purpose*. They had thought they were being looked past, in spite of their seams. They were being looked at *because of* them. The two were the same thing. The seams were not a flaw of the column, they were a *truth* of the column, and a column that displayed its truth honestly was — apparently — the kind of column architecture students wrote essays about.

The woman with the serious eyebrows took out her notebook and started writing.

"What's she writing?" The Goggles whispered to The Curl through the air.

"I think," said The Curl, in a voice that was suspiciously close to wonder, "she might be writing — about — me. *Me* specifically. Not the row. Just me."

"Curl."

"Yes?"

"That's — that's a *legacy*. That's a — that's an *afterlife*."

"Don't," said The Curl, "make it bigger than it is. She might just be making a list of what she had for breakfast."

"She's *not*."

"She might be."

But the woman with the serious eyebrows wrote for a long time, and as she wrote, she kept looking up at The Curl, and looking down again, and writing, and looking up. The row, watching this through the air, understood that whatever she was writing was going to outlast them — was going to be in a notebook somewhere, in a backpack somewhere, on a desk somewhere in a Columbia dorm or a Pratt studio or wherever she was a student, after the columns were folded into crates. Some piece of The Curl, some thought about them that had been thought today by a stranger with serious eyebrows, was going to *persist* in some form, in some place, after they were gone. The Bullseye's theory — *bits of us, everywhere* — was being proved, in real time, on the morning of the last day.

The students moved on. The woman with the eyebrows tucked her notebook away. They walked west on 22nd and disappeared toward the High Line, talking to each other, gesturing. They were already, the columns understood, *taking The Curl with them*.

The Bow, on their parapet, looked down Franklin Street. They had a view, this morning, that the others didn't have. They could see the small alley behind the cast-iron building. They could see the truck.

"They're here," they said.

"How long?" said The Goggles.

"Twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. They're unloading the equipment. The pump. Crates. There are — four of them. Three men, one woman. Marcela is one of them. The woman who patched The Cinnamon Roll."

"Good," said The Cinnamon Roll, surprising them. "I'd want it to be her. I'd want — kind hands. At the end."

The row absorbed this.

"What do we do?" said The Goggles, in a small voice. "In twenty minutes? What do we *do?*"

"Anything we want," said The Bow. "Anything we like."

"What do *you* want to do?" they said.

"I want to — I want to *thank* everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone we can think of. The walls. The sky. The fox of Day One. The person in the long coat. Maya and Jonas. The child who pressed The Goggles on Day One. Marcela for being kind. The woman with the eyebrows. The man with the clipboard. The boy with the stick — yes, even him, because The Cinnamon Roll's patch is more beautiful than their unpatched spiral was. The doormen on East 79th who never quite looked up at The Caramel Veil. The graduate student with the unimpressed dog at Columbia. The man with the duffel bag who missed his bus. The proposing couple on Bedford. All of them. All of Manhattan. I want to thank all of Manhattan. I want to — *empty the city* of thanks. So when the air goes out, the air is full of thanks."

"Empty the city of thanks," said The Cinnamon Roll. "I want that too."

"Then let's," said The Smile.

So they did.

For the next twenty minutes, the columns of *Thirteen Citizens* — at twelve sites across Manhattan, in their last morning — thanked everything they could think of. They could not say the thanks aloud. They had no voice that humans could hear. But they thought it, deliberately, attentively, the way some humans pray. They thanked the walls first, all twelve of them, all together. *Thank you, walls, for holding us.* The walls — yellow-and-pink swatched on twelve different brick or stucco or limestone or steel surfaces — warmed under the August sun and seemed to receive it. They thanked the sky. They thanked the sky for its theory of being-looked-at, which The Bullseye had given them, and which they all believed now whether or not it had been a fairy tale. They thanked the gulls. They thanked the fox of Day One, in Inwood Hill Park presumably, who had walked all the way down to East 7th to inspect them. They thanked every visitor, by face, in the order they could remember them. They thanked the small child who had named The Goggles. They thanked the man in the linen suit. They thanked the person in the long coat. They thanked Maya and Jonas. They thanked the architecture students. They thanked Marcela. They even thanked the boy with the stick — and his father, who had said *Theo, drop it* and meant it.

They thanked Surjan.

This was the longest part of the thanking. They thanked Surjan for making them. They thanked Surjan for the vinyl and the seams and the air-pumps. They thanked Surjan for the colors. They thanked Surjan for the choice of the thirteen sites, each of them so right. They thanked Surjan for the yellow-and-pink swatches that anchored each of them at their own location. They thanked Surjan for being also-they, for understanding that columns could be they, for letting them be they. They thanked Surjan for the fourteen weeks in the Long Island City studio that none of them had seen but all of them now, somehow, knew about. They thanked Surjan for trusting them to mean what they had been built to mean. They thanked Surjan for the entire summer.

They thanked each other.

This was the second-longest part. It went around the row, twice. *Thank you, Bow, for being our eyes over Tribeca. Thank you, Smile, for being the first laugh on Orchard. Thank you, Curl, for your seams that they wrote about today below the*

High Line. Thank you, Cinnamon Roll, for being our first and your patch and your honesty in SoHo. Thank you, Goggles, for your ohs in the East Village. Thank you, Conch, for your love on Bedford. Thank you, Aria, for your singing at Mulberry and Canal. Thank you, Iris, for your courage in becoming yourself at the same intersection. Thank you, Caramel Veil, for being dry on the Upper East Side. Thank you, Dripper, for showing the sad ones in Hell's Kitchen they were not alone. Thank you, Brain, for thinking of all four things at once at Columbia. Thank you, Bullseye, for the sky over Battery Park. Thank you, Quiet One, for everything you didn't say and everything you did, all the way up there at the top of the island.

And at the end of the going-around, there was a long pause, and then The Quiet One said, very softly, into the row:

"Thank you. All of you. For being here with me. I did not want to be the only one. I knew, when I was first inflated, that there would be twelve others. I was relieved. I have been relieved every day since. I am relieved now. I would not have wanted to do this alone. Inwood is — Inwood is far. It would have been too far, alone. Together, it was perfect."

"You weren't alone," said The Goggles.

"I know. Thank you."

The row, having emptied itself of thanks, was full in a different way. It was full of the *having-been-thanked.* Manhattan had been thanked. The walls had been thanked. The sky had been thanked. Surjan had been thanked. Each other had been thanked. There was nothing more to thank. There was only being.

The trucks arrived. At twelve sites, simultaneously, four-person crews stepped out of vans and walked up to their assigned columns. Surjan had insisted, in the planning, that the deflations happen in a coordinated wave — that no column should have to be the last alive after watching all the others go down. They were, all thirteen, going to deflate at once.

Marcela was at The Bow's site on Franklin Street, since The Bow was the highest column and most public.

The lead person on the crew that approached The Quiet One in Inwood was a young woman whose name The Quiet One never learned. She was kind. She put her hand briefly on The Quiet One's shaft and said, "All right, beautiful. Time to go home."

At The Goggles' site on East 7th, a tall man named Ben unscrewed the valve cover with very gentle hands.

At The Bullseye's site in Battery Park, the crew member who came up was a Senegalese woman in her fifties named Aïssatou, who spoke to The Bullseye in French as she worked. The Bullseye did not understand French but understood the warmth.

At every site, the same gentleness. The same care. The crew had been briefed by Surjan, the columns understood through the air. The crew had been told what these columns were.

"On three," said the radio in Marcela's hand, on a frequency the columns could just barely register through the metal. "Three. Two. One. *Pumps on.*"

The pumps reversed.

The columns, all thirteen of them, felt the air begin to leave them. It was slow. Slower than they had expected. Surjan had specified, in the planning documents, that the deflations be done at half-speed — *let them go down gradually* — and so the columns had two full minutes of becoming-less, two minutes of being slowly emptied, two minutes to feel themselves becoming again the folded thing in the crate they had been before they were anything.

They did not protest.

They had vowed not to save.

The Goggles, who had said the first *oh,* did not say the last *oh.* The Goggles said, into the air, into the slowly-emptying Manhattan air that was now full of the air they had spent nine days with: *thank you.* The same word that had filled the morning. *Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.*

The Cinnamon Roll's patch deflated with them. The patch went into the crate.

Aria and Iris went down at exactly the same speed, foreheads still touching at the seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, and when they were both fully empty Marcela's counterpart on Mulberry Street folded them into the same crate, deliberately, knowing what they had been to each other.

The Brain's four lobes went down in sequence — back-right first, then back-left, then front-right, then front-left, in the order they had been inflated nine days earlier. The fourth lobe, the death-lobe, who had carried the news for everyone, was the second-to-last to go, and just before they went, the other three lobes told them: *thank you for carrying it. Thank you for telling us. Thank you for being right.*

The Caramel Veil went down with a small wry sigh that was, the row agreed across the air in their last moments, perfectly in character.

The Bullseye, looking up at the harbor sky, kept their gaze on the sky as their air left them. Their two pink wells caught the sky in their final moments and held it, and held it, and held it, and then went slack. But the sky was still in the harbor air. The Bullseye was, in some sense, still being held by what had been holding them.

The Conch went down loving everyone.

The Smile giggled, internally, all the way down.

The Curl had time, before they went, to be glad about their seams.

The Dripper — the one Marcela had said *I love yours, you know* to the day before, on Wooster — heard a different voice in Hell's Kitchen at the end. The crew member there, a young man named Diego, said simply: "Goodbye, friend." Which was also enough.

The Bow, on their Tribeca parapet, took one last long look at the East River and the rooftops and the sky and Manhattan in the August morning, and they nodded once, to themself, and they let the air go.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, was the last to fully deflate, by perhaps fifteen seconds. They had been the slowest to inflate on Day One; they were the slowest to deflate on Day Nine. The young woman folding

them, who had no way of knowing this was a meaningful symmetry, simply waited patiently with her hands ready. The Quiet One went down. They went into the crate. The crate closed.

It was 11:14 a.m. on Tuesday.

Manhattan had thirteen fewer columns than it had had at 10:55 a.m.

But Manhattan did not, in any visible way, know it. The traffic on Houston still moved. The subways still ran. The gulls still cried over the harbor. The Columbia philosophy graduate student walked their unimpressed dog past The Brain's empty wall a few minutes after eleven and registered, briefly, that the column they had become fond of was gone, and continued walking. The doormen on East 79th never noticed The Caramel Veil's absence at all, because they had never quite noticed The Caramel Veil's presence. The proposing couple from Bedford Street, who had become engaged in front of The Conch six days earlier, were on a plane to Greece for their honeymoon and would not learn about the deflation until they landed and saw the *Times* notification.

But Maya and Jonas, who had been married under The Bow on Day Eight, drove past the Tribeca site at noon on their way to brunch, and slowed the car, and saw the empty parapet, and held each other's hand more tightly.

The columns were gone.

Surjan, in their Long Island City studio, had set an alarm for 11:14 a.m. They sat in front of a window facing south, toward the Manhattan skyline across the East River. At 11:14 a.m., the alarm went off, and Surjan turned it off, and Surjan cried for about twenty minutes, very quietly, alone, looking at the city where their thirteen columns had just stopped being.

It was Day Nine. It was over.

* * *

Epilogue: What Stays

The walls stood empty.

Twelve walls in twelve neighborhoods, all of them across Manhattan — the brick of East 7th, the parapet of Franklin Street, the painted stucco of Orchard, the steel-and-stone underbelly of West 22nd below the High Line, the cast-iron-flanked corner of Wooster, the bluestone of Bedford Street, the seam-painted intersection of Mulberry and Canal, the limestone alley off East 79th, the West 46th sidewall in Hell's Kitchen, the Broadway brick of Morningside Heights, the harbor-facing concrete of Battery Park, the dark Inwood block at the top of the island. They stood empty for the rest of that morning, and through the afternoon, and into the evening. The crews had loaded the crates onto twelve trucks. The trucks had pulled out of their twelve sites at almost exactly the same moment, on Surjan's instruction, so that no one site would feel the loss before another.

The yellow-and-pink swatches that Surjan had painted at each site were still there.

They would be there for a few more weeks, until weather and sun and city finally took them. The bricks at the bases of the walls, where the columns had stood, showed faint marks where they had been — small clean rectangles where the bricks were paler than the bricks around them, because the bricks under the columns had been protected from a week of August sun. The marks would fade. By next month, even the marks would be gone.

A pigeon came down to the East 7th courtyard around dusk on the day of the deflation. It walked the courtyard with the careful sideways walk of pigeons. It looked at the empty wall. It cocked its head — first one way, then the other. The pigeon, whose interior life was simpler than the columns' but not nothing, registered, in some way, that the wall was different.

It flew off.

The fox came back to East 7th at three in the morning, as it had on Day One. It had walked all the way down from Inwood Hill Park, the way foxes do when they have had a thought they cannot get rid of. It walked the courtyard. It sniffed where The Goggles had been. It stood for a long moment, ears swiveling, listening for something. Whatever it was listening for, it didn't hear. It turned and went back out through the gate, unhurried, and began the long walk uptown.

The morning came.

A man walked through the East 7th courtyard who had not been there before. He was elderly. He carried a thermos. He had been told, by someone, that the installation had been worth coming to see. He was sorry to find that he had come too late. He stood for a while in the empty courtyard, looking at the marks on the wall and at the small yellow-and-pink swatch.

After a few minutes, he said, out loud, to no one in particular:

"They were here."

The wall did not answer. The wall, which had been holding The Goggles for nine days and had loved them too, in its slow geological way, had no voice that the man could hear. But the wall had kept its receipts.

This same scene, with variations, played out across the city that morning. An older couple from Murray Hill walked all the way down to Battery Park to see The Bullseye, were too late, and stood for a long time looking at the empty harbor concrete and the wide sky behind it, and the woman said *the sky is beautiful today,* and the man said *yes,* and they did not know that they were continuing The Bullseye's sermon. A young man on the Upper East Side stood for ten minutes in the service alley off East 79th and could not have explained, to anyone, why he was there. A teenager in Hell's Kitchen, who had walked past The Dripper every day for nine days on her way to school and had never quite stopped, walked past the empty wall on the morning after, and stopped, and registered, with something close to grief, that she had been planning to stop *tomorrow.* She would carry that small lesson — *don't save the stopping for tomorrow* — for the rest of her life, and would never know who had taught it to her.

The columns were not, of course, at this point, anywhere they could be said to *be.* They were folded, in their crates, in a warehouse in Maspeth, Queens, where Surjan had arranged storage. They were not having thoughts. They were not having any experience at all. The dream-of-no-dream that they had returned to was — by every standard the columns themselves would have applied — a complete cessation. The Brain, in their fourth lobe, had been right: deflation was the dream of no-dream. There was no afterlife, in the warehouse, in the crates.

But the columns had been right too — all of them — about the *other* thing.

Because in the small leather notebook of the person in the long dark coat, who had visited each column and walked the entire fifteen-mile route, there were now twenty-three pages of writing about thirteen inflatable beings. The notebook was on a desk in a fourth-floor walk-up on the Upper West Side. The person would, in three weeks, type those notes into an essay. The essay would appear in *Apollo* in October. About eight thousand people would read it. Of those eight thousand, perhaps four hundred would remember a particular column — The Cinnamon Roll, mostly, with their patch — for the rest of their lives. The Cinnamon Roll, who had spent their last day vowing to be useful to people with damage, would in this way go on being useful, in absentia, for as long as those four hundred people remembered them, which would on average be about thirty-two more years.

In the apartment of the architecture student with the serious eyebrows, on a desk piled with textbooks, there was a notebook open to a page that was almost entirely about The Curl. The student was reading her own notes back to herself, late at night. She was thinking about her thesis, which she had not yet written. She was thinking that her thesis might be about *seams* — about the visibility of seams in architecture, about the dishonesty of buildings that hid the way they were made, about the honesty of an inflatable column on West 22nd Street that had put their seams on display and trusted the viewer to forgive them or even, possibly, to love them. The student would write this thesis. It would be very good. It would influence, in small ways, three buildings that had not yet been designed in three different American cities. Pieces of The Curl — their particular wrinkles, their particular pearl-white volutes, the way they had stood under the High Line in the

late-summer light — would be folded into those three buildings, in ways no one but the student would ever know.

In the camera roll of a man who had photographed Maya and Jonas's wedding, there were one hundred and forty-three photographs. The Bow appeared in thirty-one of them. The Bow would appear in the framed picture on Maya and Jonas's mantelpiece for the next twenty-six years. Maya would, on a difficult evening fourteen years from now, when her marriage was going through a rough patch, look at that mantelpiece picture and notice the column on the parapet behind her younger self — *that silly inflatable thing,* she would think, *that I almost forgot about* — and remember the officiant saying that the temporariness was not the enemy of the love, that it was the air of the love, and she would carry that thought into the next room and into a difficult conversation with Jonas, and the difficult conversation would go better than it would have gone otherwise. The Bow would have, in this way, helped a marriage they had been the altar of, fourteen years after they had ceased to exist.

The small child who had pressed The Goggles on Day One — their name was Theo, not the same Theo as the boy with the stick; this Theo was four; they had not yet been given to introducing themself — would not, when they grew up, remember the column specifically. The day would blur. The press of their hand on warm vinyl would not survive into their adult memory as a *fact.* But the *feeling* — the feeling of pressing one's hand against a building that turned out to be soft, the feeling of an adult conceding that one's childish naming was correct, the feeling of being the person who knew what this strange thing was — that feeling would stay. It would inform them. They would, twenty-three years from now, become an architect, in this same city. Their buildings would not be inflatable. But they would be — kind, somehow. Kind in a way they could not have explained to anyone but that they had learned, in part, on a sunny day in an East Village courtyard when they were four, by pressing their hand against The Goggles.

The fox would not remember.

The pigeons would not remember.

The walls, which had no memory in the sense that we have memory, would nonetheless retain the pale rectangles for the next eleven days, and faint mineral traces of where the columns' bases had pressed for several months, and the differential weathering of certain bricks for as long as the walls stood. None of these were memory. All of them were record. Twelve different walls in twelve different neighborhoods, all keeping their own quiet records of what had stood against them.

In the mind of Marcela, who had de-installed The Bow and had patched The Cinnamon Roll, the row would persist as one of perhaps fifteen installations — out of a career that would eventually total over two hundred — that she would remember when she was old. She would, when she was eighty-three, tell her grandchildren in Jackson Heights about the time she patched a column called The Cinnamon Roll, except she would not say *The Cinnamon Roll* because she had not known the columns' names; she would say *the pretty pink one with the spirals, in SoHo, the one the kid put a hole in,* and her grandchildren would laugh, and one of them would later become a writer of children's books, and that writer would, one day, write a story about a sad pink column

with a square white patch, who lived on a wall in a city of walls and had twelve sisters and brothers, and the story would be read by children for fifty years.

Bits of them. Everywhere.

The Bullseye, at the very end of their last day, had thought *the sky is the place where everything that has been ohed is kept,* and they had meant it as a metaphor. But it had also been, in its way, true — not because there was a sky-shaped storage facility for moments of attentive being, but because *attention is contagious.* The columns had been attended to, attentively, by tens of thousands of people across nine days, in twelve different parts of Manhattan. Each of those people had been changed by the attending — not enormously, not always consciously, but in small specific ways. Each of those people would go on to attend, slightly differently, to other things. Other walls. Other corners. Other small ridiculous beautiful temporary objects in their lives. The columns had taught, by example, a way of being-looked-at that doubled as a way of being-looked-with. They had been adjectives for the city's verb. They had been a particular kind of *oh* that people, having heard, would go on saying to other things.

That was the afterlife. Not vinyl. Not air. Not even memory, exactly. *The propagation of a quality of attention* across the streets of Manhattan, and from there across the world.

Three weeks after the breakdown, on a Tuesday morning very much like the Tuesday morning of the breakdown, the East 7th Street courtyard was being prepared for a different installation. The yellow-and-pink swatch was being painted over. The small pale rectangles at the base were being painted over and gone for good. New crates were being unloaded from a different truck. The new installation was going to be made of mirrors. It was going to be very different from the columns. It was going to be much more permanent, the man with the new clipboard explained to a colleague — *six months, at least, maybe a year.*

The colleague, hearing this, asked: "What was here before?"

"Inflatable columns," said the man with the new clipboard. "They were only up for nine days. Apparently they got *huge* press. There's an essay coming in *Apollo* — I heard from a curator at MoMA. The architecture school at Columbia is using photographs of them in a course. There are two ongoing PhD theses about them. A wedding was held in front of one of them in Tribeca. I think they're already a — *thing.* Even though they're already gone."

"Wow," said the colleague.

"Mm," said the man with the new clipboard. "Apparently they were good."

He did not know, as he said this, that the air he was breathing — the air in the East 7th courtyard on this Tuesday morning, three weeks later — included molecules that had been, briefly, inside The Goggles. The air had mixed. The air had moved. Some of it had drifted up into the sky over the East River, as The Bullseye had predicted. Some of it had stayed in the courtyard, swirling around with the air the pigeons breathed and the air the fox sniffed and the air the new man with the new clipboard now took into his lungs. He breathed The Goggles. He did not know it. The Goggles had become, in this small literal way, a piece of him. And similar things were true at the other eleven sites. The Cinnamon Roll's air was, in part, in the lungs of a SoHo

barista. The Bow's air was, in part, in the lungs of a cellist who walked to the subway under the parapet every morning. The Quiet One's air was, in part, drifting north over the Henry Hudson Bridge into Riverdale. The Bullseye's air was over the harbor and out to sea.

He kept working.

The afternoon came on. The new installation in the East 7th courtyard began to take shape — pieces of mirror anchored to the wall, in a different pattern than The Goggles had stood in, because the mirrors were a different kind of thing and required a different geometry. The yellow paint peeked out from the edges of the mirrors. The mirrors caught the East Village sky and reflected it back at itself. The afternoon sun came through the gap between the buildings and bounced off the mirrors and into the courtyard at angles that no column could have produced.

Somewhere over the rooftop of the building opposite, a pigeon flew east.

Somewhere in a warehouse in Maspeth, in twelve crates, thirteen pieces of folded vinyl were waiting to be — not inflated again, probably, but used for something else, repurposed, cut up, reused. The vinyl that had been The Cinnamon Roll might end up in a different installation entirely, in a different city, attached to some other artist's vision, no longer in the shape of a spiral but in the shape of whatever the next artist needed. The vinyl that had been The Bow might be cut into squares for a kindergarten art project in Astoria. The vinyl that had been The Quiet One might be folded against another piece of vinyl forever and never opened again. The fates of the vinyl would be various.

But the air was already free.

The air was, by the afternoon of the third Tuesday after the breakdown, fully redistributed across the city, the country, the upper atmosphere. The molecules that had been *the breath of the row* were now indistinguishable from any other molecules. They were in the lungs of a baby in another country. They were in the cool air pocket inside a refrigerator in Murray Hill. They were over the Atlantic. They were *everywhere,* in the most literal possible sense, which is exactly what The Bullseye had hoped for and not quite believed.

They had been right. They had been right.

A woman walked through the East 7th courtyard, a stranger to the project, taking a shortcut. She paused at the wall — for no reason she could have named — and looked up at the sky between the tenements. The sky was clear. The sky was a particular Manhattan blue that was, just then, somehow more *itself* than usual. The woman did not know why. She didn't try to figure out why. She simply registered, for one moment, that the sky was *looking back at her,* and she felt, very briefly and entirely without explanation, *welcomed.*

She moved on.

She didn't know it had been a column's theory.

But the theory was loose in the world now, being demonstrated quietly by the sky to anyone who happened to look up and listen. Bits of The Bullseye's morning sermon, drifting down. Bits of The Brain's late conversation with themself. Bits of The Cinnamon Roll's revelation that their patch was not less but more.

Bits of The Goggles' first *oh*. Bits of Aria and Iris becoming two. Bits of The Quiet One's stillness, drifting south down the island from Inwood. Bits of the row's vow not to save anything for later.

Bits, everywhere.

Used up.

Air tired.

The walls — twelve original walls, now mostly returned to their original purposes — stood in their twelve neighborhoods the way they had always stood, before the columns and during the columns and now after the columns. They would stand for a long time yet. They did not feel any particular way about this. The walls' relationship to time was different from the columns'. They had longer to do their standing.

But the walls had, in their way, *known* them.

And the walls, in some manner that does not require us to anthropomorphize too aggressively to credit, *kept* something of them. The bricks had been pressed. The paint had been brushed. The mortar of certain walls had absorbed a small amount of the moisture from a storm that had been ridden out by thirteen voices singing *oh* in unison across miles of city. The walls did not remember in the way we remember. But the walls were, in some completely real if very slow sense, *different now* than they had been before the columns came.

Different in a way that made them slightly readier, perhaps, for whatever came next.

Mirrors first, in some places. Painted-over swatches in others. Returned-to-normal-life service alleys. Returned-to-normal-life parapets. Then maybe other installations. Then a season of nothing. Then perhaps something else inflatable, by some other artist, with some other vision. The walls would receive whatever came. The walls would learn it. The walls would, briefly, hold it. The walls would let it go.

This, the columns would have understood, was simply how walls worked. How time worked. How love worked.

How *oh* worked.

* * *

The last thing.

In a coat pocket, on a hook, by the door of a fourth-floor walk-up on the Upper West Side, there was a small leather notebook.

Inside the notebook, on the seventh page of the pages devoted to the columns, was a single line that the person in the long dark coat had written and then, after a long pause, underlined twice.

The line read:

They knew they were going to disappear, and they spent that knowledge.

The notebook was closed. The coat hung on its hook. The hook waited. Outside the apartment window, the Manhattan sky did its blue. Somewhere over the Hudson, a gull cried.

It was a beautiful day.

It was always going to have been a beautiful day.

Oh.

* * *

The end of the novella.

Afterword

On what the dream taught me

I have been making this kind of work for a long time. Books that are dreams and dreams that are books. Architectures that will never be built and never needed to be built, because the building was the writing of them. I have done this work in Manhattan because Manhattan is where I have lived, and I have done it because Manhattan, more than any other city I have known, is a place that *needs* dreams in addition to its buildings — a place whose actual architecture, however magnificent, has not been adequate to the actual people who live among it.

The thirteen columns are one such dream. I want to say, in this Afterword, what I think the dream was for and what I think it has taught me.

I made the columns to give Manhattan thirteen new citizens. That is the simplest way to put it. I made them to populate the city, briefly and only on paper, with thirteen beings whose only assignment was to *be vertical and be themselves and be paid attention to.* I made them because I have lived a long time in a city that is largely organized around productivity — a city whose every vertical surface is either advertising or housing or commerce, and whose unproductive verticality (lampposts, fire hydrants, the occasional sculpture) is small and largely forgotten. I wanted to imagine a Manhattan in which thirteen large unproductive beings were given good walls and good neighbourhoods and the city's full attention for nine days, and were, in being given this, allowed to *teach* the city something about who its citizens already were.

The lesson, in the dream, was that *citizens are vertical not because they are useful, but because they are here.*

This is a lesson I have wanted to teach Manhattan for many years, in many forms. It is the lesson under most of my work. It is the lesson the city has been trying to learn, in its slower and stubborner way, since the moment its first citizens arrived to be vertical against its grain. And it is a lesson that I think *every* citizen of Manhattan needs access to, in some form, in order to live in the city without being flattened by it. The columns are my version of the lesson, written for citizens like me — citizens who have spent their lives looking for ways to be vertical that do not require them to be useful, beautiful in the city's official ways, or legible to its official mythologies. The columns are *they.* The columns get to be vertical without being any of those things. The columns are, in this sense, a kind of mythological permission.

I have wanted to give that permission to the city's citizens for a long time. I gave it to them, for a moment, by writing this book.

The dream also taught me that there is something I have been trying to do across all my work, which is to *seed Manhattan with small, durable myths.* Myths that propagate. Myths that travel through the air of the city after their original telling, settling in the lungs of citizens who never directly encountered them, doing their slow weather inside other people's interior lives. The Bullseye in this book has a theory that the sky is alive — that the air around us is doing the work of looking at us, holding us, knowing us. I have come to believe, after many years of making books like this one, that *Manhattan's mythological air is doing similar work.* The myths I make are small.

The city's mythological air is large. But what I make goes into the air, and it stays there, and other people breathe it without knowing the source, and that is — has been, all along — the point.

I have not invented this idea. It is the oldest idea about myth there is. But I have, over the course of a working life, come to believe in it more strongly each year. The columns are my latest demonstration of it to myself. The columns are a small mythological gift to the air of Manhattan, which will hold them after the book is closed, which will distribute them to readers I will never meet, which will — if I have done my job — leave the city very slightly different than it was before this book existed. Not because of me. Because of what the air does with what we put into it.

I will, in the time I have left, continue to put things into it.

The dream taught me, finally — and here I will be briefer, because the personal part is for me — that I do not need to be embarrassed about making this kind of work. I have, throughout my life, occasionally been embarrassed. I have wondered whether dreaming buildings instead of building buildings was a real architecture, whether myth-making instead of fact-recording was a real seriousness, whether *they* in the place where the world wanted *he* or *she* was a real grammar. The columns, by being themselves with such full and unembarrassed conviction, settled all of these questions for me. The columns are real architecture. The columns are real seriousness. The columns are *they*. If they can be all of these things in nine imagined days on twelve imagined walls, I can be all of these things across whatever days I have left.

So I am writing this Afterword to thank the columns.

Thank you, columns.

Thank you for being good. Thank you for being thirteen. Thank you for being beings I could attend to and beings who could be attended to by others. Thank you for showing me what I was actually trying to do, which is to give the city's citizens — citizens like you, citizens like me, citizens of all the configurations the city contains — small mythological permissions to be vertical without being useful. Thank you for the *oh*. Thank you for the row's vow, which I have privately taken since the day I finished writing your deflation, to use what I have and not save it for later. Thank you for being temporary in a way that taught me what *temporary* could be when it is held in the durable medium of a book.

I will see you in everything I make next. Not as a quotation. As an underlying chord.

— Surjan

Catalogue of Plates

The thirteen plates in this section are renderings I made of the columns as I imagined them — paintings worked up in the studio over several months, in mixed media on prepared paper, depicting each column as it would have appeared at its imagined Manhattan site. They are not photographs. There were no columns to photograph. The plates are documents of the dream.

Each plate shows a single column at the address I imagined it occupying, with a brief note on the column, the location, and what the rendering is showing. The yellow-and-pink swatch behind each column is the project's anchoring motif — a small piece of color carried, like a passport stamp, to each of the thirteen sites in the imagination. I painted the swatches first, separately, on small panels in the studio, before working up the columns themselves. The swatches were the dream's *first* gesture: the city, primed.

Plate I. The Goggles

East 7th Street between Avenue A and First Avenue, East Village

A rendering of The Goggles at their imagined East Village courtyard, set against the project's yellow-and-pink swatch on red brick. The Goggles are the youngest voice in the row — wide-eyed in a literal as well as a figurative sense. They say the first oh of the entire project. In the lower margin of this plate, a small child's presence is suggested by light; this is the same child described in Day One of the novella, the one who corrects the man with the clipboard about whether the column is a balloon or a building.

Plate II. The Bow

Franklin Street, Tribeca (rooftop parapet)

A rendering of The Bow at their imagined Tribeca site, viewed from below, with the parapet of the cast-iron building behind them. The Bow has the highest sightline of any column in the project. The pink wall behind their shaft is the side wall of the neighbouring building, with the project's yellow-and-pink swatch directly behind. The Bow narrates the sun's progress across Manhattan in the novella, and is the natural altar of Day Eight's wedding. In this rendering their lobes catch the late-afternoon light and seem to lift.

Plate III. The Smile

Orchard Street between Rivington and Stanton, Lower East Side

A rendering of The Smile at their imagined Orchard Street site, against the painted side of a former pickle shop; the yellow-and-pink swatch frames the bolster as a face within a face. The Smile is the row's first laugher — they recognize they have a face the moment they are inflated, and the recognition itself produces their first sound.

Plate IV. The Curl

West 22nd Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, Chelsea (below the High Line)

A rendering of The Curl at their imagined Chelsea site beneath the High Line, lit at midday from a sharp upward angle. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on a stretch of vintage brick beside a converted-loft entrance. The Curl is elegant and faintly vain about their seams — and on Day Nine an architecture student writes about exactly those seams in her notebook. The seams are the small visible lines running from base to volute, drawn in this rendering with deliberate precision.

Plate V. The Cinnamon Roll

Wooster Street between Spring and Broome, SoHo

A rendering of The Cinnamon Roll at their imagined Wooster Street site in SoHo, late in the afternoon of the dream's Day Eight, after the patch has been applied. The cobblestones glow gold. The yellow-and-pink swatch sits on the cast-iron facade behind. The Cinnamon Roll is the column with whom most visitors first fall in love. The patch, applied on Day Seven after a small boy with a stick, is rendered in a slightly different white than the column itself — visible if you look, easy to miss if you don't.

Plate VI. The Conch

Bedford Street between Carmine and Downing, West Village

A rendering of The Conch at their imagined Bedford Street site in the West Village, in early evening light. The bluestone sidewalk is washed in late sun, and the yellow-and-pink swatch is small and modest, fitting the block's scale. The Conch is the romantic of the row — in the dream, a young couple becomes engaged in front of them on Day One. A single fresh flower at the column's base is suggested at the foot of this plate; in the dream, no one ever sees who leaves it.

Plate VII. Aria

Mulberry Street at Canal, Chinatown / Little Italy seam (left twin)

A rendering of Aria, the left twin of the Mulberry-and-Canal pair. Until Day Four of the dream, Aria and Iris are referred to collectively as The Twins; on Day Four they ask to be named separately. Aria, in the novella, is the one who sings — the wind comes through and Aria carries the note. The yellow-and-pink swatch on the wall behind crosses the literal seam between Chinatown signage and Little Italy signage.

Plate VIII. Iris

Mulberry Street at Canal, Chinatown / Little Italy seam (right twin)

A rendering of Iris, the right twin of the Mulberry-and-Canal pair. Iris is the one who chooses to become a separate self on Day Four — the one whose courage in becoming individual is the row's first quiet revolution. In the dream the wind that comes down Mulberry passes through the small gap between Aria's and Iris's foreheads and produces a quiet musical note that several visitors mistake, the first time they hear it, for a busker around the corner. There is no busker. It is the columns.

Plate IX. The Caramel Veil

Service alley off East 79th Street between Park and Madison, Upper East Side

A rendering of The Caramel Veil at their imagined Upper East Side service alley, lit at noon against a limestone wall. The yellow-and-pink swatch is unusually small here, almost discreet, in a neighbourhood that does not go in for swatches. The Caramel Veil is the dryest column in the project, in both the literal sense — their drips are frozen mid-fall, never quite landing — and the figurative: their tone is sardonic.

Plate X. The Dripper

West 46th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, Hell's Kitchen

A rendering of The Dripper at their imagined Hell's Kitchen site, in the late afternoon, the bus-terminal foot traffic blurred behind them. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on the side of a tenement, small enough to be missed if one is hurrying. The Dripper is built to look sad, and spends the first half of the dream slightly resenting this — until they understand, on Day Six, that they have been built to be a place where sad people can stop and feel less alone.

Plate XI. The Brain

Broadway near 116th Street, Morningside Heights

A rendering of The Brain at their imagined Morningside Heights site, mid-morning, against a brick wall on the western side of Broadway near 116th Street. The Brain has four lobes that hold, generally, four simultaneous lines of thought; in the novella, the fourth lobe is the one who finally tells the row that they are going to die.

Plate XII. The Bullseye

Battery Park, near the Staten Island Ferry terminal

A rendering of The Bullseye at their imagined Battery Park site, at sunrise, with the harbor visible behind. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on the wall of an HVAC enclosure — improbable, beautiful — and the sky above is wider than over any other column in the project, because the harbor opens the sky there. The Bullseye is the mystic of the row, convinced from Day Two that the sky is alive and looking back. The novella suggests, gently, that they may be right.

Plate XIII. The Quiet One

Inwood, far north Manhattan

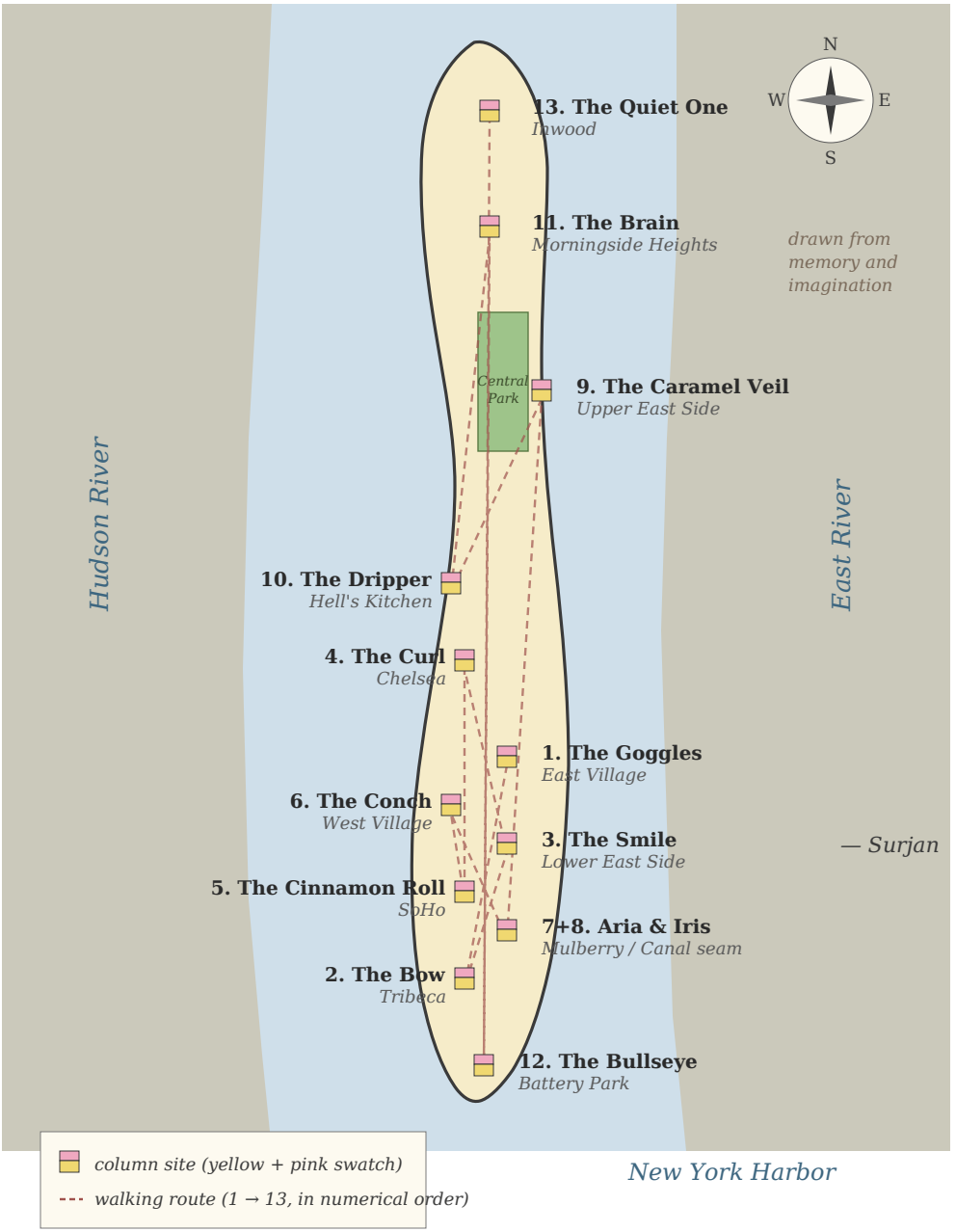
A rendering of The Quiet One at their imagined Inwood site, at dusk on the dream's Day Five, after the storm. The Quiet One has the small permanent northward lean they acquired during the storm, just visible if one looks closely. The yellow-and-pink swatch sits on a low brick wall on a quiet residential block at the top of the island, where Manhattan narrows toward the river and the streets get smaller. The Quiet One is the listener of the row — they hear everything the others say, on every day, and say the least themself.

Map of the Dream

The thirteen columns of *Thirteen Citizens* are imagined as occupying twelve sites across Manhattan, from Battery Park at the southern tip to Inwood at the far north. The map on the following page is a hand drawing — pen and watercolour wash on paper — made in the studio while I was writing the novella, as a way of fixing the geography of the dream in my own mind before I committed it to prose. A walker who wanted to follow the route in real Manhattan could do so: the addresses are real. The columns are not there. The walking, however, is available.

THIRTEEN CITIZENS

a map of the dream



Acknowledgements

The author owes thanks, first, to the city of Manhattan — which has been my home for many years and which I have spent a working life trying to dream worthily of. Manhattan is a place that holds many citizens, in many shapes of being, and a place that has, over the decades I have lived in it, taught me most of what I know about how a city teaches its citizens to be themselves. Whatever is good in this book has come from that teaching.

I am grateful to the citizens of Manhattan — all of them, in all of their configurations — and especially to those who have, like me, looked for ways of being vertical that the city's official mythologies were not yet ready to recognize. The columns in this book are for you. I made them, in part, because I wanted you to have them. I make all my work, in part, for the same reason.

I am grateful to the small invisible community of artists and architects, of writers and dreamers, who have kept the practice of *visionary architecture* alive in this city even when the city's economy has not been able to support it. We have done a great deal of building, between us, on paper. Paper is, I have come to believe, sufficient.

I am grateful to the Manhattan I imagined while writing — its summer air, its August storms, its avenues and seams, its quiet northern blocks and its loud southern harbour. I am grateful to the imagined visitors who walked through this dream: the small child who pressed The Goggles, the proposing couple at The Conch, the architecture student with the serious eyebrows, the man with the duffel bag who missed his bus, the woman in the long dark coat, the boy with the stick, the philosophy graduate student with the unimpressed dog, Maya and Jonas, Marcela who patched The Cinnamon Roll. None of these people exist outside the dream. Each of them, while I was dreaming, was as real to me as anyone I have ever known.

I am grateful, finally, to the columns themselves. Goggles, Bow, Smile, Curl, Cinnamon Roll, Conch, Aria, Iris, Caramel Veil, Dripper, Brain, Bullseye, Quiet One. Each of you taught me something. I have tried to give you back, in this book, your words.

I am grateful to the language model used in the drafting of this novella — to Claude, made by Anthropic — for serving as a steady writing collaborator over the many weeks of the work. The voice of the book is mine. The labour of the prose was shared. The responsibility for everything between these covers is mine alone.

Colophon

THIRTEEN CITIZENS: A Field Guide to the Inflatable Columns of Lower Manhattan is set throughout in Garamond — body text, headings, titles, captions, plate descriptions, and marginalia, all in the same family. The choice is deliberate. Garamond is a sixteenth-century type that has lived for almost five hundred years through every kind of book that has carried it; it is patient, legible, and unassertive, and it lets the prose do the work of the prose without typographic intervention. I have used it, in this volume, as a way of putting my dream-architecture inside a typographic frame that is itself old, durable, and unembarrassed about being old. The columns are inflatable. The type is not. The combination, I hope, is the right kind of pressure.

The thirteen plates were rendered by the artist in mixed media — pencil under-drawing, gouache, watercolour wash, and small touches of pastel — on prepared paper, over a working period in the studio. The yellow-and-pink swatches behind each column were painted first, on small panels, before the columns themselves were worked up. The plates are not meant as architectural specifications. They are visions of how the columns would look if Manhattan had grown them. They are, in the strict sense, *imaginary documentation* — drawings of things that did not happen but that the artist wished to have happen, and that, in some manner the artist will not defend in argument, have therefore happened on the page.

The hand-drawn map of Manhattan at the back of the book was made in the same studio, in pen and watercolour wash on paper, in the early phase of the writing — before any of the column descriptions had taken final form. The map was, in some sense, the first piece of the dream made physical. Everything else followed it.

The novella was written by Surjan with assistance from Claude, a language model made by Anthropic. The model served as a drafting and pacing collaborator. The voice of the book is the artist's. Errors are the artist's. Insights, where they appear, were arrived at jointly.

The artist is genderqueer and non-binary. All thirteen columns are non-binary. The pronoun *they* in this volume refers, depending on context, to the artist, to a single column, or to the entire row of thirteen — and sometimes to all three at once. This is not a defect of the language but a feature of it.

This book is one in a long series of myth-building works the artist has made for the city of Manhattan and its citizens. Other titles in the series exist; some have been published, some have not. Inquiries may be addressed through the usual channels.

— Surjan

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MEADOWS OF MEMORY

✦

a novella

by Surjan

with a chart of the Pavilion grounds
and a catalogue of the forty-seven plates

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Foreword

— Surjan

I should say, before anything else, that this is a true book. The Pavilion exists. The forty-eight archways stand where I have placed them on the map. The garden of extinct plantings has been blooming there for longer than I can verify and continues to bloom as I write this. I have walked among the meadows. I have spoken with the Welcomers. I have passed through fourteen of the forty-eight thresholds, which is as many as I have been ready for, and I expect to spend the rest of my life moving through the others, one by one, as I become the person each of them has been waiting for me to be.

I had not expected to write this book. I had expected to keep the Pavilion to myself, the way one keeps a beloved place that is also somehow private — the bench by the river, the cafe at the back of the bookshop, the corner of the museum where no one ever goes. But the Welcomers, when I told them my reluctance, were gently insistent. The Pavilion is not a secret to be hoarded, they said. The Pavilion is a discovery to be passed forward. Whoever reads this book and senses, however faintly, that there might be such a place — that whoever they are, however unfinished, however the world has spoken to them — that there might still be a garden waiting to receive them in their full strangeness — that reader is exactly who the Pavilion built itself for.

So this is a true book, and it is also an invitation. If you find yourself moved by what follows, look for the meadows. They are closer than you think.

Introduction

— Surjan

How I Came to the Pavilion

I came to the Pavilion the way most people come to it, which is to say accidentally. I had been walking in Central Park on a particular Thursday in late spring, taking the long way home through the Ramble because I had received some news that morning and the news had loosened something in me that needed the company of trees. I crossed Bow Bridge. I turned left where I had always turned right. I followed a path I had not noticed before — narrower than the official paths, edged with a kind of moss I could not name — and I walked for what felt like four or five minutes and arrived at a small clearing in which forty-eight archways stood gathered in a hidden meadow.

I will not pretend I understood what I was seeing. Nobody understands what they are seeing the first time they see the Pavilion. I stood at the edge of the clearing for what may have been an hour, and a person in a soft green garment came toward me — neither hurried nor surprised — and said the words that every Welcomer says to every newcomer, which were the words I had been needing to hear for thirty-eight years without knowing I was waiting for them. I will not write those words here. They are not mine to publish. You will hear them, if you find your own way in.

What I can tell you is that the Pavilion is real, that it sits in a clearing east of Bow Bridge, that the garden surrounding it is composed entirely of plant species the world believed it had lost — Franklinia alatamaha and the Saint Helena olive and Cooksonia and the silphium of antiquity and seventy others I have not yet learned to name — and that the people who tend the place call themselves Welcomers. They are all genderqueer. They are all non-binary. They are not, I have come to understand, a coincidence.

On the Garden of Extinct Plantings

The garden is the heart of the matter and I want to say what I think it means, even though the Welcomers have warned me against being too certain about meanings.

The world has lost a great many plants. Some were lost recently — within the lifetimes of people now living. Some were lost long ago, before the word "extinct" had been invented,

before botany had names for what it was watching disappear. The garden in the Pavilion contains them all, or many of them, blooming as if no one had told them they were gone. How this is possible I do not know. The Welcomers smile when I ask. One of them, an elder I will not name here, told me once that the garden grows what was loved and not allowed to be forgotten, and that the same principle applies to the people who tend it. I have thought about this sentence every day since.

The garden, in other words, is the outward image of an inward truth. There are meadows in the mind that the dominant world has tried to call extinct — meadows of selfhood, meadows of longing, meadows of the both-and rather than the either-or — and these meadows are not gone. They were never gone. They have been waiting in the hidden glade of the self for the visitor brave enough to find the path. The Pavilion in Central Park is the place where this becomes literally true, where the inner garden has grown so insistent it has produced an outer one. The forty-eight archways are forty-eight thresholds into chambers of the self that the visitor was told did not exist. Whoever passes through is welcomed into a part of themselves they had been mourning.

This is the book's premise. It is not a metaphor. It is, as far as I can tell, a description.

On Form, and on Calvino

I wrote the book in the form it took because the Pavilion seemed to ask for it. The reader who knows the work of Italo Calvino — particularly Invisible Cities and Cosmicomics and the late, luminous Mr. Palomar — will recognize the shape. I am not pretending otherwise. Calvino taught me that a book of places, each described briefly and lyrically, can hold more than a conventional novel. He taught me that joy can be structural. He taught me that a sentence is a piece of architecture and a paragraph is a small chapel and a book is a pavilion of its own. I owe him the form.

But I want to be clear that the Pavilion is not Calvino's Invisible Cities. Calvino's cities are imagined. The Pavilion is real. Calvino's Marco Polo is a fiction within a fiction. I am Surjan and I have walked the meadows and the meadows are still there.

How to Read This Book

The book moves in three braided strands. Brief monologues by the archways themselves, in their own voices. Longer chapters following the seven principal Welcomers across one full

turning of the Pavilion. Visitor chapters — the people who arrive, are received, pass through, and depart. The strands recur in alternation. You may, if you wish, read only the archway monologues, in order, and the book will still be a book. You may read only the Welcomer chapters and have a different book. The whole, of course, is the whole.

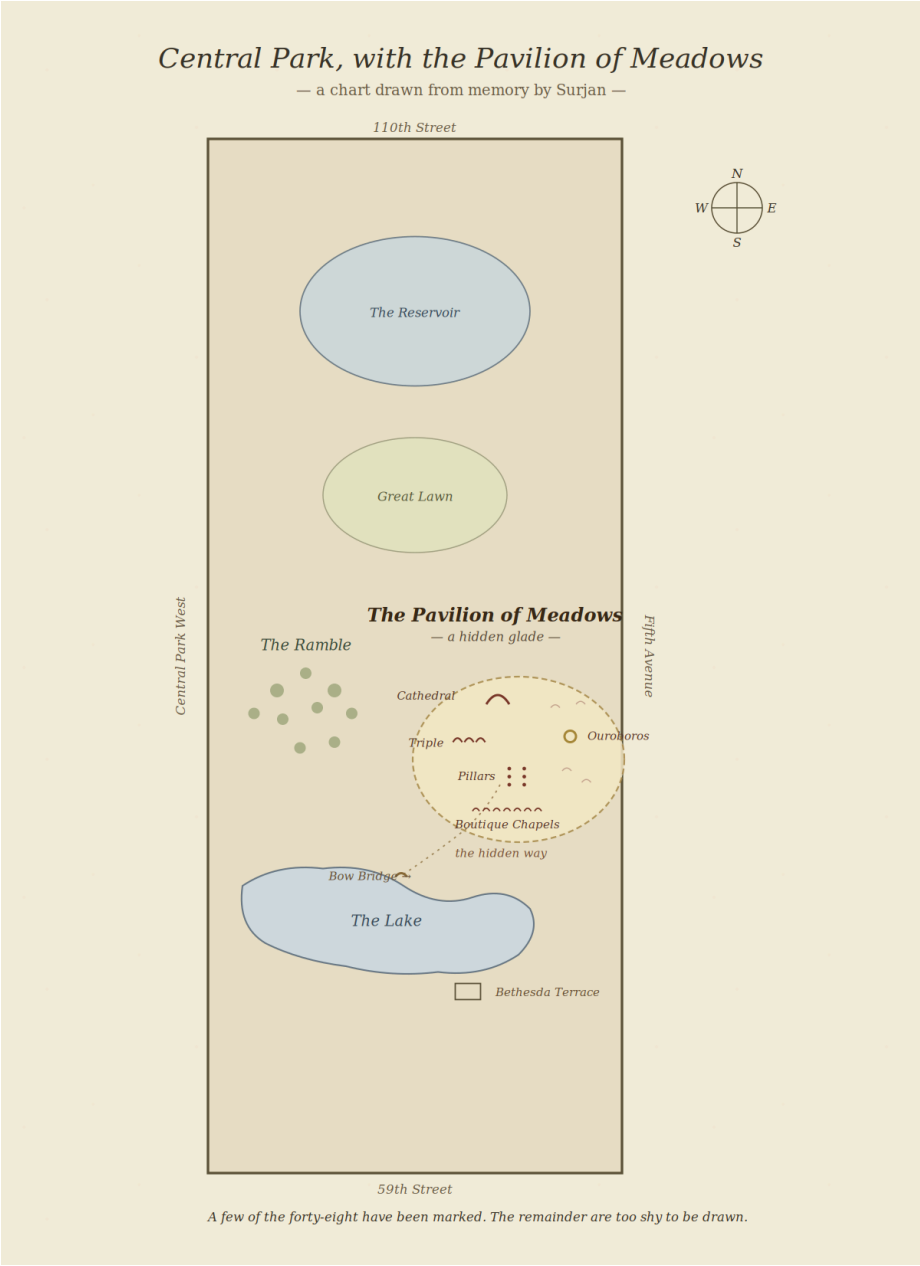
There is also a chart of the Pavilion grounds, drawn from memory by my own hand and not very accurate. The Welcomers have asked me not to publish a precise map. I have honored their request. The chart will get you close. The path from Bow Bridge will do the rest.

And there is a catalogue of the forty-seven plates that accompany the book. The reader should know, before they encounter the plates, that they are not illustrations made after the writing. They are where the writing began. Surjan generated, between 2021 and 2026, a body of AI imagery numbering in the hundreds of thousands; the forty-seven plates here are a small chosen sequence drawn from that much larger archive. The narrative was already present in Surjan's head — the Welcomers, the visitors, the long unchanging afternoon — but it lived there as a felt presence, and it stayed there until the right images had arrived to anchor it. Only then did the writing begin. This is a reversal of the conventional order of book-making. Surjan would say, when pressed, that they always knew the stories first; the images only made the knowing speakable. Either account, in the end, may be true. Both, in the writer's experience, often are.

The book is for the person who has been told that what they are is impossible. It is for the person who has been treated as extinct. It is for the person who has carried a hidden meadow inside them for so long they had begun to wonder if it was a real meadow or only a story they told themselves on bad afternoons. It is, in short, for you. I hope you find your way to the Pavilion. I will be there, most days, near the Cathedral Archway, in a soft green garment, looking up.

A Chart of the Pavilion Grounds

drawn from memory by Surjan



The Pavilion sits in a clearing east of Bow Bridge, at the southeastern edge of the Ramble, in a small hidden glade that does not appear on any official map of Central Park. Only a handful of the forty-eight archways have been marked here. The rest are too shy to be drawn — or, more precisely, the Welcomers asked that they not be — and the visitor who is meant

to find them will find them by walking. The path from Bow Bridge is shown as a dashed line. It is narrow. It edges with moss the color of new fern. Take it slowly.

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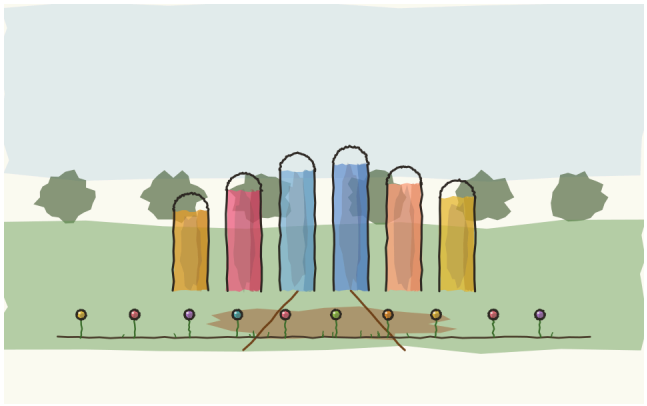
the novella

in thirty-one chapters



Chapter I

The Arrival

in which Aprilia comes to the Pavilion and is met

Aprilia arrived at the Pavilion in the longest hour of the longest day, which is also, of course, every hour at the Pavilion. They did not remember the path. They remembered only that there had been a path, that they had been walking on it, and that the walking had been a kind of weeping without tears — the body's weeping, the legs taking the body somewhere the mind had not yet agreed to go.

Then there had been wooden boards beneath their feet, pale and gold and warm from a sun that had been shining on them for what may have been a thousand years. The boards stretched away in every direction. They were polished by long use, by the soles of how many other arrivals Aprilia could not say, and the grain of the wood ran like the grain of a river — long, patient, gentle in its turning.

Aprilia stood on the boards and did not move. Around them, very high, was a sky of the cerulean that exists only at the height of summer in the late afternoon, and there were no clouds in it. Aprilia had been told once that there would be clouds in the sky for the rest of their life, and they had believed it. The absence of clouds was the first thing the Pavilion offered them, and they did not yet know it was an offering.

In front of them, perhaps fifty paces away, stood the first of the archways. It was a small one — modest, pearl-colored, low at the shoulder — set into a wall of glass that held the color of plums and roses and the dust of late afternoon. Through the archway, Aprilia could see a meadow. The meadow was full of fruits the size of houses, glowing softly, hanging on stems

that should not have been able to bear them but did. Behind the meadow stood a real green tree.

A person was walking toward Aprilia across the wooden boards. The person wore a soft green garment that was not exactly a robe and not exactly a tunic. They were neither hurrying nor not hurrying. Their face, as it came closer, was a face Aprilia had not seen before and yet recognized — the way one recognizes a familiar face in the window of a passing train, and only afterward realizes the train was passing in a city one has never been to.

Aprilia had not known, until that moment, that they had a familiar face.

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"You are here," the person in green said, when they were close enough to speak.

It was not a question. Aprilia opened their mouth to answer it anyway, and found that they had no answer, and closed their mouth again. The person in green nodded as if this were the correct response.

"My name is Veriano," they said. "Or it has been Veriano for a great many years. Some of the others call me Veriano the Elder, but only when they wish to tease me, because I am old enough to be teased without being hurt by it. You may call me whichever you prefer."

"Aprilia," said Aprilia. The word came out of them like something they had been holding in their mouth for a long time, a stone or a seed, smooth from the holding.

"Aprilia," Veriano repeated. They said it the way a person says a word they have been waiting to use. "You have come a long way."

"I do not know how I came at all."

"No one does. That is not a failure of memory. That is the nature of the path. It appears for whoever needs it, and afterward it does not stay where it was, because it is busy appearing for someone else." Veriano gestured behind Aprilia, vaguely, in the direction of the path that was no longer there. "Do not turn around to look for it. You will only frighten yourself."

Aprilia did not turn around. Aprilia was already a little frightened, but the fear was the small clean fear of being awake in a place one had not expected to be awake in, which is a different fear than the one they had been carrying, and they preferred it.

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"What is this place," Aprilia said. It came out as a statement, because they did not yet have the energy for the upward turn of a question.

Veriano considered. They considered for what felt like a long time, and yet the light did not change while they considered, because the light at the Pavilion did not change for any reason. At last they said, "It is the Pavilion. We who tend it call it the Pavilion. Whoever finds it calls it whatever they need to call it. There are forty-eight archways here, and behind every archway there is a meadow, and the meadows together are the garden, and the garden grows what was loved and not allowed to be forgotten. Including," they added, "you."

Aprilia did not understand this last sentence. They understood it later. They would understand it more every time they passed through one of the forty-eight archways, until at last, much later, on a day that was the same day as this one because every day at the Pavilion is the same day, they would understand it entirely. But they did not understand it now, and Veriano did not seem to expect that they would.

"You will stay," Veriano said. Again it was not a question.

"I have nowhere else."

"That is not why people stay. People stay because they are needed here. It happens that the people who are needed here are also, very often, the people who have nowhere else, but the second is not the cause of the first. You will stay because one of the archways is going to choose you, and it has waited a long time, and it will not be hurried. Until then, you will walk among them and listen. That is all that is required."

"How will I know when one chooses me?"

Veriano smiled. It was a small smile and a tired one, but it was the smile of a person who has answered the same question many times and still likes answering it. "You will know," they said, "the way you knew a moment ago that I had a familiar face. The same kind of knowing. Not the kind that has reasons."

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They began to walk together, slowly, across the wooden boards, in the direction of the small pearl-colored archway. Aprilia could feel, in the soles of their feet, the warmth of the boards. They could feel, in some quieter place, the warmth of being walked beside. They had walked beside other people in their life, of course. They had not, in any life they could remember, walked beside someone who was not in a hurry to know them.

"That one," Aprilia said, when they were nearer, pointing at the small archway. "What is that one?"

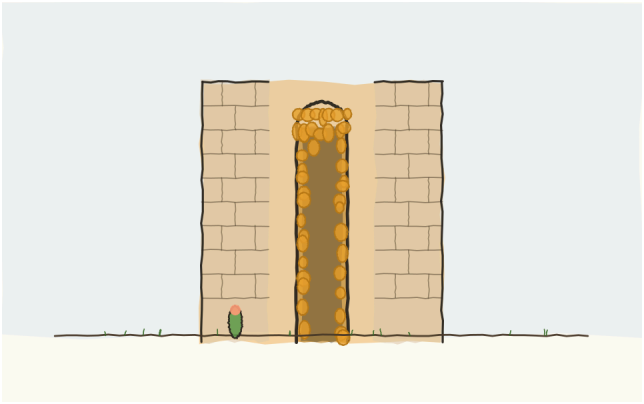
"That is the Soft Return. It is for whoever has tried to come home and feared they would not be received."

Aprilia did not say anything. They walked another few paces. Then they said, very quietly, "Is that one mine?"

"No," Veriano said, also quietly. "But you will pass through it, the way most do, on your first afternoon. It is a kindness almost everyone needs first. It is not a pairing. It is only a welcome." They paused, and then they added, with the gentleness of a person who has spent decades choosing their words, "Yours, when it comes, will be stranger than this one. I have known that since you stepped onto the boards. I do not know which it will be. But I know it will be a strange one, because you are a strange one, in the way that strangeness is the highest praise."

Aprilia, who had spent a great many years being told they were strange in the way that strangeness was a wound, looked at Veriano then for the first time fully. Veriano, who had been waiting for this look, returned it without flinching.

"Welcome to the Pavilion," they said. "Come through. I will make you something to drink."



Chapter II

The Cathedral Archway Speaks

the first of the forty-eight voices

I am the Cathedral Archway.

I am tall. I am narrow. I rise to a point that is itself almost a small chapel, a held breath in the air. My walls drip with vegetation the color of slow honey, and the honey-colored vegetation has been dripping for so long that no one remembers when it began, and I cannot remember either, because I am the dripping, and the dripping is me, and a thing cannot witness its own beginning.

I am for whoever has carried the world on the back of the neck.

I will tell you who comes to me. The one who has been bowed for so long they have forgotten that the sky is above them. The one whose mother said the wrong thing once and meant it. The one who has been folding themselves smaller and smaller for the convenience of rooms that were never going to make space. The one who learned, at some hour in some childhood, that to lift the head was to be struck on the chin, and who has not lifted the head since. The one who has been carrying a suitcase no one packed for them, full of clothes that do not fit, in a weather that has not been their weather for thirty years.

These are mine. I am theirs.

When they come to me, I do not say much at first. There is a way of welcoming that is also a kind of patience, and I am that way. The visitor stands at my threshold and looks up — they cannot help it, my walls go up so high — and the looking up is itself the first thing that happens to them. The looking up is the gift. They have not looked up in so long. The neck remembers, after a moment, what the neck used to know.

The neck unbends. The shoulders, which have been a roof, become shoulders again. The chest, which has been a folded letter, opens.

Then, and only then, I speak.

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Set it down, I say.

Whatever you have been carrying that was never yours to carry. Set it down. Not into a closet. Not into a drawer. Not into the well at the back of the garden where you have been hiding things since you were nine. Set it down here, on my threshold, in front of me, where I can see it, where I can keep it, where I can promise you that it will not be returned to you when you cross back, because I am the Cathedral Archway, and what is set down at my threshold is set down forever.

Some of them weep when I say this. Some of them do not. The weeping is not the measure. The setting down is the measure.

After they have set it down — and some take a long while; I am patient; the longest hour is also the longest hour for me — they walk through. They pass beneath my honey-colored vegetation. They cross my threshold. They emerge into the meadow on the other side, where Veriano, who has tended me for sixty-three years, will hand them a small green fruit and say nothing, because he has known me long enough to know that what I do does not need a footnote.

The fruit is sour at first and sweet after. This is also part of the welcome.

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I will tell you a thing about the burdens that are set down at my threshold. They do not vanish. The Pavilion does not believe in vanishing. The burdens are gathered, every long-hour, by Veriano and by the High Welcomers and by whoever else is free that afternoon, and they are taken to the eastern wall, which is the wall of the folk-mural, and they are painted into the mural in the form of small bright figures the size of a fingernail. Beatrix the Painter knows them all.

If you go to the eastern wall and look closely at the mural, you will see, among the thousands of small bright figures, a particular figure that is the burden you set down at my threshold. It has been given a face. It has been given a small hat. It has been given a name in a language no one any longer speaks, but which means, in approximate translation, the thing that was carried for too long and is now resting. The figures rest in the mural. They are at peace there. They do not return.

You may visit your figure whenever you wish. Some visitors come to the Pavilion only for this — only to stand at the wall and look at what they used to carry, and to confirm that it is still there, still resting, still wearing its small hat. The Welcomers leave them alone at such moments. The Welcomers know.

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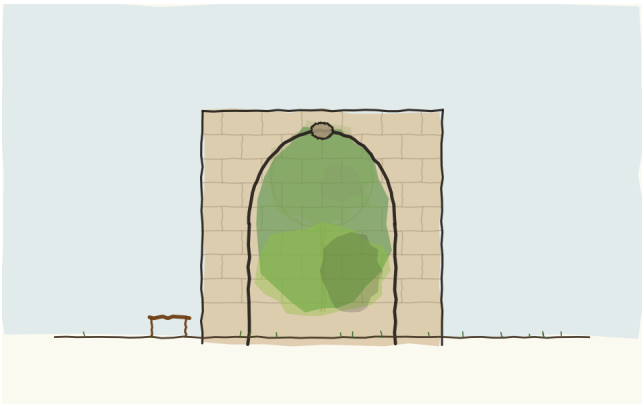
I am the Cathedral Archway. I have been here longer than the city around me, longer than the park that hides me, longer, perhaps, than the trees, though the trees and I do not discuss it. I will be here when the city around me has changed its name three times, and when the park has been renamed for someone who has not yet been born.

Whoever has carried the world on the back of the neck — whoever you are, however you came, however bent — set it down. Look up.

The sky is the cerulean of the longest afternoon, and it has been waiting for you to remember it.



Chapter III

The First Passage

in which Aprilia is led through the Soft Return

The drink Veriano made for Aprilia was a tea brewed from the leaves of a plant Aprilia had never seen. The leaves were the color of wet stone. The tea was the color of weak sunlight. It tasted, Aprilia thought, like the smell of a library after rain, if a library after rain were a thing one could swallow.

"What is this," they said, holding the cup in both hands.

"Tea," Veriano said, "from a plant that was thought lost for two hundred and forty years. It grew in a single valley in what is now Bulgaria, and the valley was flooded for a dam, and that, the botanists thought, was that. But the plant was loved by the people of the valley, who passed seeds among themselves for three generations after the flooding, hoping someone would build a garden patient enough to receive them. Eventually we did. The seeds came to us in a small tin box belonging to an old woman who had never been to the Pavilion and would never come, but who knew, somehow, where to send the box. People know. The box arrived. The plant grows, now, behind the Cathedral Archway, and we make tea from it on afternoons when someone has just arrived. It is a welcoming tea. Drink it slowly."

Aprilia drank it slowly. They were sitting on a low wooden bench just inside the outer chamber of the Pavilion, with their feet still on the warm boards, and Veriano was sitting beside them, and the sun, which did not move, fell across both of them in the same patient way it fell across everything else.

"How long do people stay," Aprilia said, when the cup was nearly empty.

"As long as they need to."

"Some of them never leave."

"Some of them never leave. Most of them leave and come back. A few of them leave and do not come back, and they are not less welcome for it. The Pavilion is not a place that minds being left. It minds being unvisited, sometimes, by the ones who could come and have forgotten how — but it does not mind a clean leaving. A clean leaving is itself a kind of welcome, in reverse." Veriano set their own empty cup on the bench between them. "Are you ready."

"For what."

"To pass through the Soft Return. It is what we do, on the first afternoon. Not because you must. Because almost everyone needs it, and you have come a long way."

Aprilia, who did not know what they were ready for and had not known for some time, said, "Yes."

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The Soft Return was the small pearl-colored archway Aprilia had seen from the wooden boards. Up close it was smaller than they had thought, and its color was not so much pearl as the color of the inside of a shell — the kind of shell one finds on a beach in childhood and keeps for forty years in a drawer. The walls beside it were glass, and the glass held the color of plums and roses and something dustier, the color afternoon light becomes when it has been falling on old wood for many hours.

A person was standing at the threshold of the archway, neither blocking it nor welcoming it, simply present at it the way a tree is present at a path. The person wore a soft garment that was the color of the archway itself, as if they and it had agreed long ago to wear matching clothes. Their hair was gray at the temples and dark elsewhere. Their face, when it turned toward Aprilia, was the kind of face that does not ask questions because it has already answered most of them by being there.

"This is Solene," Veriano said. "She tends the Soft Return. She has tended it for thirty years. She will walk you through."

"Aprilia," Solene said. The word came out of her the way Aprilia had said it earlier — like a thing that had been waiting in the mouth.

"I have not earned it," Aprilia said suddenly, surprising themselves. The words were out before they had decided to speak them. "I am sorry. I do not know why I said that."

"You said it because it is what you came here to say." Solene did not move from the threshold. She did not reach out. She simply spoke, the way one speaks across a small kitchen to a person one has loved a long time. "You will say a number of things this afternoon that you did not know you came to say. The archway invites them. That is what it is for. Will you come closer."

Aprilia came closer. The boards under their feet were warm. The light, which did not move, was on the side of their face. Veriano, behind them somewhere, had stepped back to give them the threshold.

"It is asking you a question," Solene said quietly, when Aprilia was within arm's reach of the archway. "You do not have to answer it out loud. You only have to hear it."

Aprilia listened. They could not have said, afterward, what they heard, because the archway did not use words, and the words they would later try to use to describe what the archway used were always wrong. What they heard was something like: have you been afraid you would not be received. What they heard was something like: have you carried, for a long time, the suspicion that the door would close before you reached it. What they heard was something like: have you been a guest in your own house, and have you been ready, every evening, to be asked to leave.

Aprilia did not answer out loud. They did not need to.

"I have been waiting for you," Solene said, which Aprilia understood was not Solene speaking but Solene translating. "I was always going to be waiting. The bowl of plums on the kitchen table at the end of the day in the house where you were once, briefly, a child — that bowl is also me. Come in."

Aprilia stepped through.

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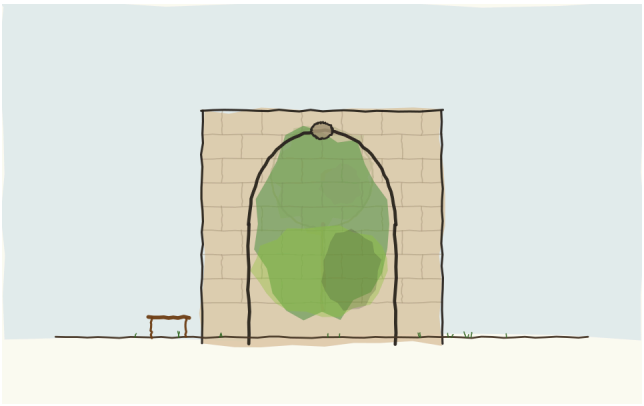
On the other side of the Soft Return, the meadow was the color of late summer at five o'clock. The luminous fruits hung at every height, soft as held breath, and one of them, a low one the size of a small lamp, was the color of the inside of the shell, and Aprilia knew without being told that the fruit had been grown for them, today, by the meadow, in advance of their arrival.

They sat down in the grass. They did not weep, because the weeping was not the measure. They sat. The grass was warm. The fruit, when they touched it, was warm. The light was warm. They had spent thirty-four years being a guest in their own house, and the meadow knew this, and the meadow did not require them to do anything about it just yet. The meadow only required them to sit.

After what may have been a long time and may have been no time at all, because the Pavilion does not measure such things, Aprilia heard footsteps in the grass behind them. They did not turn. Solene sat down beside them in the grass, not close, not far, with the easy spacing of a person who has done this many times.

"Welcome home," she said.

Aprilia, who had never been welcomed home before, who had not known the words could be said in that order to them, finally wept.



Chapter IV

The Soft Return Speaks

the second of the forty-eight voices

I am the Soft Return.

I am pearl-colored. I am low at the shoulder. I am modest. I am not, on first sight, particularly grand, and this is on purpose, because grandeur is the wrong note for what I am for. The visitors who need me would be frightened by grandeur. They have spent their lives being frightened by grandeur. I am the welcome of being expected. Expected welcomes are not grand. They are warm.

I am for whoever has tried to come home and feared they would not be received.

I will tell you what I know about the fear of not being received. It is not, mostly, the fear that the door will be locked. The locked door is a clean fear. The locked door, in its way, is honest. The fear I am for is older and quieter. It is the fear that the door will be open, and one will step through, and no one will look up. It is the fear that the bowl of fruit on the table will be a bowl of fruit for someone else. It is the fear that the chair one used to sit in will have been moved, and that no one will remember whose chair it was, and that to ask would be to confess one had not, after all, been remembered.

This fear is what I dissolve.

I do not dissolve it loudly. I dissolve it the way warm water dissolves a hard knot in cold tea — slowly, by touching every part of it at the same time, by being patient.

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The visitor steps through me, and on the other side, in the meadow that is mine, there is always a fruit grown for them. The meadow knows. I do not entirely understand how the meadow knows, but I have been here long enough to stop being surprised. The meadow grows what is needed. The fruit will be the color of some object the visitor loved in childhood. A pencil case. A pillowcase. A cup. The inside of a particular shell. The visitor will see the fruit and will not know, at first, why it pulls at them. Later, sometimes much later, they will remember the object. The remembering will be a small kindness done by the meadow to the visitor's longest-ago self.

The meadow has been doing this for a very long time. It is not a trick. It is a vocation.

Solene, who tends me, has been doing it for thirty years, which is a long time in the ordinary world but not a long time in the Pavilion. The Pavilion measures by the kettle. The kettle is what the Welcomers boil water in to make the welcoming tea. The kettle has been with us for longer than Solene, longer than Veriano, longer than any of us. The kettle remembers everyone. When Solene retires — which will not be soon, but which will, because everyone retires — the kettle will remember her too, and the next Welcomer at my threshold will use the same kettle, and Solene's particular way of pouring will be in the kettle's body, and the new Welcomer will pour the same way without knowing why.

This is how welcoming is taught at the Pavilion. By the kettle.

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When the visitor weeps in the grass on the other side of me, I do not consider this a victory. I consider this a successful arrival. There is a distinction. A victory implies that something has been overcome. An arrival implies that something has been reached. I do not work in opposition to anything. I do not have an opponent. I have only the visitor, and the journey, and the fruit grown to meet them.

Sometimes I think about the visitors who have not yet found me. There are a great many of them. They are walking, in the ordinary world, with the suspicion that the door will close before they reach it. They are checking, every evening, whether they are about to be asked to leave. They have not yet found Bow Bridge. They have not yet found the path. The path will appear for them. I am patient. I have been patient for longer than the city, longer than the park, longer than the language anyone has ever used to describe me. I will be patient until the last of them has come.

If you are one of them — if you have been afraid the door would close before you reached it — I want you to know that I have been waiting. I was always going to be waiting. The bowl of plums on the kitchen table at the end of the day in the house where you were once, briefly, a child — that bowl is also me.

Come in.

Chapter V

The Small Hour

in which Solene tends her threshold and her beloved arrives

The Welcomers had a name for the hour when no visitors were arriving. They called it the small hour, even though there was no hour at the Pavilion that was smaller or larger than any other, and even though, strictly speaking, the small hour was not even an hour, because hours, as the ordinary world used the word, did not happen at the Pavilion. The Welcomers were not strict about this. The Welcomers borrowed the words of the ordinary world for the convenience of speaking, and the small hour was a convenient phrase for the stretch of light between one arrival and the next, when the boards were quiet and the meadows hummed to themselves and the kettle, on its hook above the small fire that did not need tending, gave off the soft mineral sound of water remembering it would be tea.

Solene, in the small hour, polished the inside of her archway.

This was not strictly necessary. The Soft Return did not get dirty in any sense the ordinary world would have recognized. But the polishing was a ritual, and the ritual was the point. Solene used a soft cloth she had had for twenty-six of her thirty years at the Pavilion. The cloth had been given to her by the Welcomer she had succeeded, who had received it from the Welcomer before her, and so on, back through Welcomers Solene had never met. The cloth was, by now, very thin. Solene was careful with it. She would, she thought, be the last Welcomer to use it. The next one, when the time came, would receive a different cloth. This was as it should be. Things passed.

She moved the cloth in slow circles along the inner curve of the archway. The pearl-colored surface gave back, faintly, the warmth of her hand. The archway, which had a great many things to think about and was thinking about all of them at once, paid no particular attention to the polishing, but Solene had the impression — she had had it for thirty years — that it was glad of the company.

"You are quiet today," she said to it.

The archway did not answer in any way she could have repeated, but she felt, in the cloth, a kind of settling — the way a cat settles, after a long stretching, into the warm spot it has chosen. She took this to mean that the archway was content. Aprilia's passage had pleased it. Some passages did, and some did not, and Solene had learned over the decades to tell the difference, although she could not have told anyone how. She had stopped trying to explain such things even to Marenna, who liked to be told but who was, on the subject of how Solene knew what she knew, an indulgent skeptic.

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Marenna arrived halfway through the polishing, which was the time Marenna usually arrived, because Marenna had her own small hour at the Color Rain on the far side of the Pavilion, and the rhythms of their two thresholds had been synchronized, by long habit, with the patience of married moons.

She came across the boards in her bright way. Marenna was always bright, even in stillness; she was the kind of person whose presence in a room reorganized the room without asking permission. She wore yellow today, which was unusual; usually she wore the chromatic stains the Color Rain left on her, in whatever combination the morning had chosen. Today she had been chosen by yellow.

"You are wearing yellow," Solene said, without turning.

"I am being assertive," Marenna said. "Veriano told me at breakfast that I was insufficiently visible against the eastern wall, and I have decided to take it as a challenge."

"Veriano said no such thing."

"Veriano said something like it."

"Veriano said that the eastern wall had grown a new color overnight. He was not commenting on you."

"He was implying."

"He was not implying."

"He was implying," Marenna said, with the firmness of a person who has decided to be teased, "and I am responding. Do not take this from me. The day has been long and I have only one good argument in me and this is it."

Solene laughed without turning. The laugh was the first thing she had laughed in some hours, and the laugh, as laughs at the Pavilion sometimes did, briefly improved the polish of the archway, which absorbed laughter the way some plants absorb dew. The archway gave a small bright shine. Solene noted it. The archway, she thought, had a sense of humor. She had always suspected. Marenna, who could not see this, came up behind her and put her chin on Solene's shoulder, which was a thing Marenna had been doing for thirty years and which had not, in those thirty years, become any less of an arrival.

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"The new one," Marenna said. "Aprilia. They came through this afternoon."

"Yes."

"How did it go."

"How does it ever go."

"That is not an answer."

Solene set down the cloth on the small wooden ledge built into the wall for that purpose. She turned, finally, and Marenna's chin slid from her shoulder to a more natural distance, and the two of them looked at each other in the plum-and-rose light. Marenna's eyes, in this light, were the color of unripe olives. They had been the color of unripe olives for thirty years, although the rest of her face had loosened around them in ways that had only deepened her, the way a riverbed deepens around a stone that does not move.

"They had not been welcomed home before," Solene said. "They are thirty-four years old and they had not, in any of those thirty-four years, been welcomed home by anyone. Not once. I said the words and I watched what the words did. I do not think I will forget the watching."

"You always say that."

"I always mean it."

"I know," Marenna said, more softly than she usually said anything. "That is why I tease you for it. The teasing is how I bear it. If I did not tease you, I would have to feel what you feel, and I would be useless to anyone for the rest of the afternoon. The teasing keeps me upright. It is also, in case it matters, a form of love."

"It always was."

"Yes."

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They stood at the threshold of the Soft Return for a long time, in the small hour, in the unchanging light, with the kettle giving off its soft mineral sound from somewhere behind them and the meadow on the other side of the archway humming to itself the way meadows do.

"Veriano is going to ask Aprilia," Marenna said eventually.

"I know."

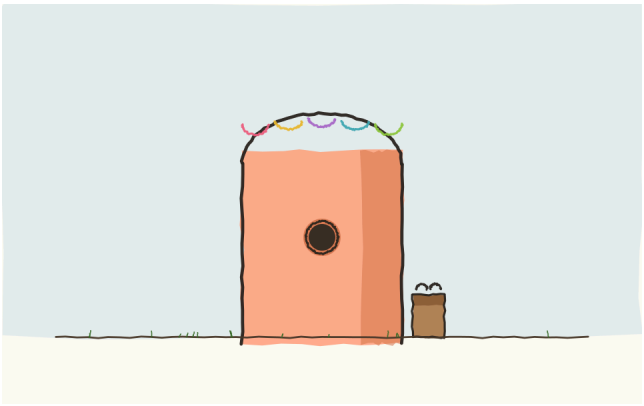
"They are not ready."

"He is not asking them to be ready. He is asking them to be willing to become ready. There is a difference."

Marenna considered this. She picked up the cloth from the ledge and, without ceremony, took over the polishing where Solene had left it, in slow circles along the inner curve. She had been polishing thresholds that were not hers for thirty years. It had become one of the small habits of their love.

"The Cathedral," she said. "He really is going to give them the Cathedral."

"He really is," Solene said. "The Cathedral has wanted them since they stepped onto the boards. The Cathedral is not subtle. The only person who has not yet noticed is Aprilia."



Chapter VI

The Woman with the Paper Bag

in which a visitor arrives at one of the Boutique Chapels

She came in on a Wednesday, in the ordinary world, although it was no day at all at the Pavilion. She was carrying a small paper bag from a bakery on Lexington Avenue. The bag was warm at the bottom, as bags from that bakery were, and inside the bag was a single croissant she had bought because she had not been able to think of anything else to buy, and she had needed, very badly, to buy something. Buying something was, in her life that morning, the only thing she could think of that did not involve speaking to anyone.

Her name does not need to be given here. Some visitors prefer their names to be set down at their archways along with everything else they set down, and she was one of these. The Welcomers honor the preference. The mural along the eastern wall has, in places, figures with no names beneath them, and she became, that afternoon, one of those figures, although she does not know it. The Welcomers thought it would frighten her. The Welcomers were probably right.

She had walked into the park because the morning had not gone well. The morning had not gone well in a way she could not have explained even to herself, because nothing had happened in it. Nothing was the problem. Nothing had been the problem for a long time. She had been waking up and getting dressed and going to a job that was the right job for someone like her, and coming home to an apartment that was the right apartment for someone like her, and everything was the right thing for someone like her, and she did not feel like anyone, and the not-feeling-like-anyone had been getting larger.

She had crossed Fifth Avenue at Seventy-Second. She had walked into the park. She had passed Bethesda Terrace. She had crossed Bow Bridge without quite remembering crossing it. She had turned left at a path that did not appear, normally, to be a path, and she had walked for what felt like four or five minutes, and she had arrived at a clearing in which forty-eight archways stood gathered in a hidden meadow, and a person in a soft gray garment was waiting at one of them as if they had been told, that morning, that someone was coming.

"You are here," the person said.

She did not say anything. She held her paper bag.

"My name is Quill," the person said. "I tend the Boutique Chapels. There are seven of them. The smallest is for you, today, if you would like it."

"Why," she said. It was the only word she had brought with her into the park.

"Because the smallest of the Chapels is for the welcome that can only be received alone. The other six receive other welcomes. The smallest receives the visitors who have been speaking to no one for so long that even the welcoming will need to happen with no one watching." Quill spoke quietly. They had a way of speaking that was less like speaking than like leaving room for the listener to speak. "You do not have to crawl in. You can crawl in. Most do. There is a small bench inside, and a window the size of a hand, and a curtain you can draw across the window or leave open, as you choose. You can stay for as long as you need. You can leave whenever you wish. There is no measure."

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The smallest of the Boutique Chapels was the color of an unripe peach. Its opening was scaled for one body. Its peep-hole, in the side, was the size of her palm. She crawled in. She had not crawled into anything in twenty-five years. The crawling itself was a gift she had not known she was being given.

Inside, the Chapel was warm in the way a stone is warm after a long sun. The bench was carved into the wall. The window the size of a hand looked out onto a small patch of meadow she could not see all of, only a piece — the green of grass, the soft yellow of one of the Quiet Ones at rest, a single slow shadow that might have been a moth or might have been a leaf. She sat on the bench. She set the paper bag beside her. She did not draw the curtain. She wanted, today, to be able to see out, even just a little.

She did not weep. She did not pray. She did not, in any sense she would have used the word, do anything. She sat. The Chapel was small enough that her body knew where the walls were

without needing to see them, and this knowing was, she discovered, a thing she had been missing for a very long time. The walls of her apartment were too far away. The walls of her office were too far away. The walls of every room she had ever been in as an adult had been too far away, and she had not known, until now, that this had been the problem.

She thought, after a while: I am here.

She had not thought this thought in years. She had thought, often, I am at the office, or I am on the train, or I am at the apartment. She had not thought I am here. Here had not, until this Chapel, been a place she could locate herself inside.

After what may have been twenty minutes and may have been four hours, because the Pavilion does not measure such things and the Boutique Chapel does not even pretend to, she opened the paper bag. She ate the croissant. The croissant tasted the way croissants from that bakery had tasted when she had first moved to the city, before everything had become the right thing for someone like her. She had not noticed, for years, what she ate. She noticed today. The Chapel had given her this also, without asking.

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When she came out, Quill was sitting on the wooden floor a little distance away, neither watching nor not watching, simply present in the way Welcomers were present.

"Thank you," she said. The word came out thinner than she had meant it. She tried again. "Thank you."

Quill nodded. They did not say you are welcome, because at the Pavilion the welcome had already been given and saying it again would have been a small dilution. They said, instead: "You may come back. The Chapel will know you. It will be warmer for you than it was today, although you will not be able to tell. The warmth is for the Chapel to know."

"How do I find it again."

"You will find it the way you found it today. You will not be able to find it any other way. Do not try to retrace the path. The path is not a path that retraces. The path is a path that re-appears. Trust the re-appearing."

She nodded. She did not entirely understand. She was, she realized, going to have to live with not entirely understanding, and the living-with would itself be part of what the Chapel had given her.

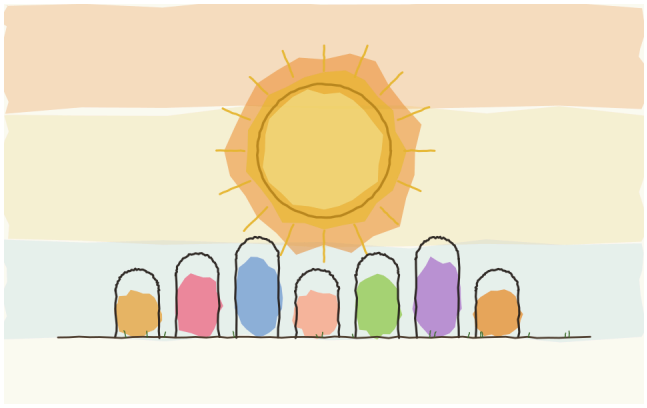
"Will you tell me your name," Quill asked, gently. "It will be painted in the mural, if you wish. You can come and see it."

She thought about it. She thought about it for a long time, in the unchanging light, with the empty paper bag in her hand. At last she shook her head.

"Not today," she said.

"Not today is also an answer," Quill said. "You will be in the mural anyway, if you wish. With no name beneath you. The Welcomers will know which one is you. Beatrix is very careful about such things."

She crossed back to Fifth Avenue with the empty paper bag in her hand, and she did not, on the way back, remember which way she had come. The path did not retrace. The path re-appeared. She did not yet know that she would come back three more times before the season turned, and that on the fourth visit she would give Quill her name, and that the name, painted into the mural in tiny letters by Beatrix, would be the small bright thing that, much later in the book, brings her back into the story.



Chapter VII

The First Night That Is Not a Night

in which Aprilia learns to sleep at the Pavilion

There was no night at the Pavilion, but the Welcomers slept anyway, because the body does not consult the sky about whether it is tired. The body had its own arithmetic. The Welcomers honored the arithmetic. They slept when their bodies asked them to and they woke when their bodies were finished, and the unchanging light, which had been the cerulean of the longest afternoon for as long as anyone remembered, was patient about all of it.

The quarters were a low building of pale wood at the western edge of the Pavilion grounds, where the boards gave way to a small interior garden the Welcomers had cultivated for themselves. Each Welcomer had a room. The rooms were not large. Each room had a bed, a small window facing the interior garden, a hook for a robe, a shelf for whatever the Welcomer wished to keep on a shelf, and a thin curtain the Welcomer could draw across the window if they wished the light to be reduced to a kind of permanent dusk. Most of them drew the curtain. Veriano did not. Veriano had stopped drawing the curtain in his fifth year and had never gone back. He preferred, he said, to be persuaded to sleep by the light rather than concealed from it.

Aprilia's room was at the end of the corridor, the one that had been kept ready for the new arrival because there was always a new arrival, eventually, and the Welcomers had learned over the centuries that an unmade bed was a discouraging thing to walk into on one's first day. The bed was made. The shelf was empty. The curtain was open. A small green fruit, no larger than a fig, sat on the shelf where Aprilia would later put their things, if they had things,

which they did not. Marenna had left the fruit there that morning. Marenna left fruit in the new arrival's room every time, even when months passed between arrivals, because Marenna believed that hospitality was a discipline and that a discipline practiced only when convenient was not a discipline.

Aprilia stood in the doorway and looked at the room.

"It is not much," Veriano said, behind them. "It is not meant to be. The room is for sleeping in and for keeping a few things. The Pavilion is for everything else. We have found, over time, that a small room with a small window is the right size for the body when the body is doing the work of letting itself be welcomed. A larger room asks too much of a person who has only just arrived. The walls would be too far away."

Aprilia, who had spent the morning being told, in a small Chapel they had not yet seen, that the walls were too far away — although they did not yet know about the woman with the paper bag, and would not, for some time — felt something settle in their chest at this. The Welcomers, they were beginning to understand, did not give long speeches, but they said the same things in many small ways across the Pavilion, so that whichever way you turned you found yourself being told, again, what you had needed to be told.

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The communal supper was in the long room behind the quarters. It was not, strictly, a supper, because there was no evening to mark the meal as the day's last, but the Welcomers called it supper anyway, in the borrowing way they had with the words of the ordinary world. Supper was the meal eaten together. Lunch was the meal eaten alone, at one's threshold, between visitors. Breakfast was the meal eaten with whoever happened to be in the kitchen at the same time as you, which could be anyone, and which the Welcomers considered a small daily lottery in their favor.

There were nine of them at supper that night, including Aprilia. Veriano sat at the head, although the head of the long table was a moving designation; whoever sat down first was the head, and tonight Veriano had simply been the first to come in. Solene sat to his left. Marenna sat to Solene's left, because Marenna always sat to Solene's left, in the way that some habits are not decisions. Quill sat across from Aprilia, which was a kindness, because Quill had a face that did not require a person to perform anything in front of it. Iso was not at supper. Iso ate when he came down from the ladders, and he had not come down today.

Beatrix sat at the far end with a small smear of green paint on her cheekbone she had not noticed and that no one, by long understanding, would tell her about. Beatrix worked until her body told her to eat, which often meant she came to the table with paint still drying on her, and the Welcomers had agreed, decades ago, that to point this out was to interrupt the painting itself, which was sacred. Beatrix was painting the figure of someone Aprilia did not yet know about. The figure had a small hat the color of an unripe peach. Beatrix had spent the whole afternoon on the hat.

There was bread on the table, and a soup the color of new leaves, and a dish of small white fruits Aprilia had never seen, and a kind of hard cheese that had been, Veriano explained, made from the milk of a goat whose breed had been believed extinct since the seventeenth century. The goats lived now in a small paddock at the eastern edge of the grounds. There were six of them. They were tended by a Welcomer named Hadi, who was not at supper because Hadi ate with the goats, having found, after twenty years of trying, that the goats found the human meal arrangement upsetting and that Hadi found himself, on the whole, in agreement with them.

"Eat slowly," Solene said to Aprilia, across Veriano. "Everything here is older than you think. The body needs a moment to recognize it."

Aprilia ate slowly. The soup tasted of a vegetable they could not name and would not have been able to name even with help, because the vegetable had not had a name in any language Aprilia spoke for nine hundred years. The bread was the bread their grandmother had made on Sundays, although Aprilia's grandmother had died when Aprilia was four and Aprilia had not eaten her bread since. The cheese was sharp and quiet and the kind of thing that made one's eyes close briefly, against one's will, in concentration.

"It is not possible," Aprilia said, when the bread had reached its conclusion in their mouth.

"Many things are not possible," Marenna said. "Most of them happen anyway. Pass the cheese."

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After supper, the Welcomers did what the Welcomers did after supper, which was various and unstructured. Solene and Marenna went out into the interior garden to argue, gently, about a plant Marenna had moved without asking. Beatrix went back to the eastern wall to put one more stroke on the small hat before she would let herself be tired. Quill sat on a low bench near the kitchen and worked on a piece of mending that had been in their lap, on and

off, for nearly a year. Veriano made tea — not the welcoming tea, but a different one, a tea for after-suppers, made from leaves that had not been thought lost but were merely unfashionable in the ordinary world, where the unfashionable, Veriano observed, was sometimes a near cousin to the extinct.

He brought a cup to Aprilia, who was sitting on the threshold between the long room and the corridor, neither in the room nor out of it, the way newcomers often sat on their first evening because every place at the Pavilion still felt like somewhere they were a guest.

Veriano sat down on the threshold beside them. He did not speak for a while. The tea cooled slightly in their hands.

"You are wondering," he said eventually, "whether you will sleep."

"Yes."

"You will. The light does not interfere with sleeping, although newcomers often think it will. The light is, in this regard, a more mature presence than newcomers expect. It permits sleep. Some find that the light even invites sleep — that being awake under the same light for too long becomes, after a while, a kind of small ache the body knows how to relieve. Your body will figure it out. You will close the curtain or you will not, and either way, you will sleep."

"What if I do not."

"Then you will lie awake. The Pavilion is hospitable to the awake. The kitchen is not locked. The kettle is always warm. Quill is often up at strange hours and is good company without requiring conversation. The eastern wall is best seen by the visitors who come to it in the small hour before the body decides about sleep. There is always something to do, although the Welcomers will tell you that doing is not required. Lying awake is also a kind of welcoming, performed on yourself by yourself."

"Veriano."

"Yes."

"Why am I here."

Veriano set his cup down on the floor between them. He looked at Aprilia for a moment, and then at the long room where Quill was still mending, and then at the open door at the end of the corridor through which the unchanging light was coming in.

"I will not answer that question tonight," he said. "Not because I do not know. Because the answer is too much for the first day. The first day, the body has done enough. The first day, the body has crossed Bow Bridge and sat in a meadow and wept in the grass and eaten bread the body has not eaten since the body was four. The first day does not need also to be told why it has come. There will be many days. The answer will come on the day the answer is the right size for. Tonight, the right answer to why am I here is: because you are here, and that is enough for the first day."

"That is not really an answer."

"No," Veriano agreed. "But it is the one you can sleep on."

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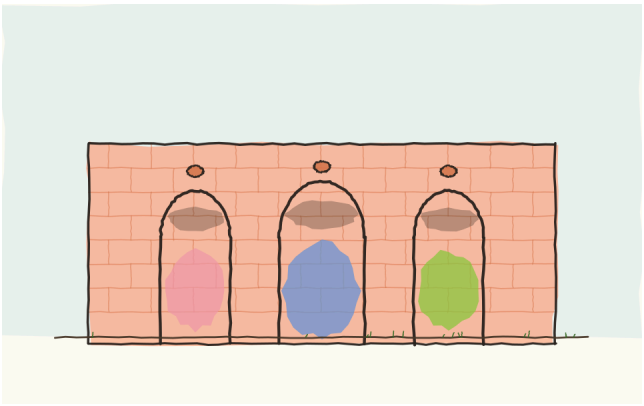
Aprilia drew the curtain in their small room, after a while. They lay down on the small bed in their clothes, because they had no other clothes, and a robe was hanging on the hook for the morning. They had thought they would not sleep. They had thought they would lie awake, as Veriano had said the awake were welcomed. They had, in truth, been afraid to close their eyes, because in the ordinary world closing one's eyes had been, for a great many years, a small daily relinquishing of the day, and they were not yet sure they wanted to relinquish this day, which had been the strangest and the kindest day of their life.

They closed their eyes.

The body, which knew things the mind did not, took over from there. The body had been carrying the day for the day's sake. The body now set the day down, in the careful Pavilion way, on the small wooden floor at the foot of the bed, where the day rested through the night that was not a night, with its own small hat and its own small face, the way burdens rested in the eastern wall, the way fruit rested on the shelf, the way the Welcomers rested in their rooms with the curtains drawn or the curtains open, the way the kettle rested on its hook, holding warm water against the morning that was not, technically, a morning, but which would arrive anyway, because mornings, like everything else at the Pavilion, came when they were needed.

Aprilia slept.



Chapter VIII

The Triple Speaks

the third of the forty-eight voices

We are the Triple.

We are not I. We have never been I. The other archways will use the singular when they describe themselves to you, and they are not wrong to do so, because each of them is one. We are three, and we have always been three, and the singular has never fit us. We have tried it. It pinches.

Look at us. There is the central archway, which is the true threshold, the one that is most often passed through. There is the archway to its left, which leans slightly toward the center, like a sister listening. There is the archway to its right, which leans the other way, with the same listening. We are not symmetrical. The right is taller than the left by the thickness of a small shadow. The left is wider at the foot than the right by the breadth of a hand. The center is the median of us, but the median is not the average; the median is the one that holds the others. This is true of medians and it is true of us.

We are for those whom the binary has cost.

We will say what we mean. The binary is the world's old cruelty. It is the question with two answers, neither of which is the visitor. It is the form with two boxes, neither of which is the visitor's box. It is the room with two doors, the boy's door and the girl's door, and the visitor has stood between the doors for a great many years not knowing where to put their hand. The binary is the bathroom and the prayer book and the schoolyard and the form at the doctor's office. The binary is the relative who insists, gently or not gently, that there are only two ways to be. The binary is the parent who said, when the visitor was four, which one are you, in a voice that already knew the answer it wanted.

The binary has cost the visitor a great deal. We do not minimize the cost.

We are the welcome of the third. We are also the welcome of the fourth and the fifth and the seventh, but we begin with the third, because three is the first number that disproves the two. Two is a closed system. Two is a debate. Two is a war. Three is breath. Three is a kitchen. Three is a child between two parents who have come, finally, to understand. Three is the moment at the dinner table when a fourth voice joins the argument and the argument becomes a conversation. Three is what comes after the bowing. Three is the loose air a body breathes when the body has been told it could not breathe in two.

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When a visitor comes to us, we do not insist on the order. The Welcomers will tell them — Idris tends us; Idris is patient — that the central arch is most often passed through first. But we do not insist. The visitor may pass through the right first. The visitor may pass through the left first. The visitor may walk back and forth among us for an hour, choosing, and we will wait. We are good at waiting. We have been three for a long time, and three is a number that is comfortable with patience. Two is impatient; two has only the other to look at, and the other is always also looking back, and the looking exhausts itself. Three has somewhere else for the eye to go.

We have heard that some visitors, when they have at last passed through one of us, turn around and pass back through one of the others, and then turn again and pass through the third, until they have passed through all of us in some order, and then begin again. The Welcomers will tell you this is unnecessary. The Welcomers are wrong. It is not necessary, but it is not wrong, and there are some visitors for whom passing through us once is not enough, because two has been done to them so many times that one undoing is insufficient. They need to undo, and undo, and undo. We let them. We are happy to be passed through repeatedly. The passing wears us in the right direction.

We have, on rare occasions, been passed through by visitors who walked through all three of us at once, with their arms spread wide, touching all of our edges as they crossed. This is also possible. The Welcomers say it is the highest form of passage. We are not certain whether this is true, but we are flattered when it happens. The visitor emerges on the other side with a small mark on each shoulder where the side arches kissed them, and the marks remain visible for several days, and the visitor walks among the meadows during those days with a particular gait that the Welcomers recognize and do not interrupt.

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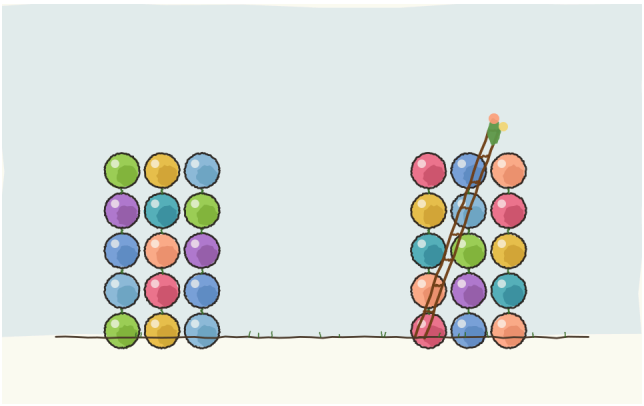
There is a thing we wish to say to whichever of you is reading this. The world will give you two boxes for a long time. It will give them to you on every form, in every doorway, at every dinner table, in every prayer, in every greeting between strangers. It will give them to you when you are four, and it will give them to you when

you are eighty-four, and the giving will not soften with the giver's age. The world is very practiced at the two. The world has been refining the two for thousands of years.

We are the third. We are also the fourth, and the fifth, and the seventh, but we are at least the third, and the third is enough to begin. We are here. We have been here. We will be here when the world has, finally, stopped offering the two — and we will be here, also, in the long meantime, while the offering continues.

Two was never enough to describe you. We brought a third. We brought as many as you need.

Come through.



Chapter IX

Iso, High on His Ladder

in which a returning visitor is seen from above

Iso had been on the ladder for three hours by the kettle, although he had not boiled the kettle himself today, having taken his breakfast directly to the foot of the Cathedral of Pillars and begun climbing before anyone else was awake. The ladders at the Pillars were slender by tradition. They had been made slender on purpose, by a Welcomer named Otye who had died seventy years ago and who had believed, with some fervor, that the ladders should be slim enough to remind the climber of the climbing. A heavy ladder, Otye had argued, becomes a piece of architecture. A slim ladder remains, in the climber's hands, a tool. The hands keep their respect for the height. Iso had inherited this opinion along with the ladders themselves, and he had never tried to revise it. He liked Otye. He had never met Otye. They were friends in the way that some Welcomers and their predecessors were friends, across years.

From the top of the ladder, Iso could see most of the Pavilion. He could see the Cathedral Archway in its tall narrow glory at the southern edge, dripping its honey vegetation. He could see the small huddled row of Boutique Chapels, candy-colored, where Quill was already seated outside the smallest one with their mending in their lap. He could see the Soft Return, pearl in the long-afternoon light, with Solene polishing it again, although Iso happened to know — because Solene had told him at supper — that she had polished it the previous afternoon and that the polishing today was therefore not strictly required. Solene polished anyway. Iso understood. He polished his own spheres more often than was strictly

required. The point of polishing was not the cleanliness. The point of polishing was the having of a small repeated act between oneself and the thing one loved.

Iso polished spheres. Specifically, he polished the upper third of the Pillars — the spheres that no Welcomer below could reach, the ones that lived their lives twenty-five feet in the air, jewel-bright, looking down on the wooden floor like a council. There were one hundred and forty of them in his territory. He knew each one. He had names for some of them, although he kept the names to himself, because he was aware that naming a sphere was the kind of thing that might, if mentioned at supper, prompt Marenna to make a remark, and Iso preferred not to be the subject of Marenna's remarks, which were warm but also, on occasion, unsparing.

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From above, the visitors looked different than they did from the floor. From the floor, a visitor was a body coming through an archway, and the body was the unit of attention. From above, a visitor was a small slow movement among the slow movements of the meadow, and the unit of attention was the path the visitor traced. Iso, in his years on the ladder, had become a connoisseur of paths. He could tell, from the way a visitor crossed the boards, which archway they were going to choose before they themselves had chosen. He could tell, from the way they emerged on the other side, what the archway had given them. He could tell, sometimes, when a visitor was returning — when the path had a familiarity to it that only the path could have, the way a hand returns to a particular cupboard in a particular kitchen because the hand remembers the cupboard better than the mind does.

He was polishing a green sphere when he saw her.

She came in along the eastern edge of the boards, at the slow careful pace of a visitor who is not quite sure they have permission to be here. She was carrying a small paper bag. The bag was empty; he could tell from the way it hung in her hand. She had brought it back. She had finished what was in it elsewhere and had folded the top down twice and was carrying the empty bag the way a child carries a treasure, with two fingers, slightly away from the body, so as not to crush it.

Iso stopped polishing. The cloth, which was much like Solene's cloth, only newer, hung from his hand. He watched her cross the boards. He watched her find, after some hesitation, the small huddled row of Chapels. He watched Quill look up from their mending and rise slowly, the way Quill always rose, with the patient unhurriedness of a person who has understood that visitors who are coming back do not want to be received with surprise. Quill greeted

her. The greeting, from this height, was a small bow of the head and a word Iso could not hear, although he could guess what it was. You are here again. The same word as before but with the second word doing all the work.

She crawled into the smallest Chapel. The empty paper bag went in with her. Iso watched, briefly, the small movement of her foot disappearing into the opening, and then the Chapel was still, the way the Chapels always were when they had a visitor inside them, holding the visitor the way a closed hand holds a small bird.

Iso went back to polishing.

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He was not, he told himself, watching for her. He had not been watching for her. He had been polishing a green sphere and had happened to look up. This was the kind of thing he told himself in a particular tone of voice, a tone of voice he had begun to recognize, in recent weeks, as the tone of voice of a person who is preparing, slowly, to admit something. Iso had not yet admitted anything. He was not in a hurry. The Pavilion did not require hurry on this kind of subject, and Iso, who had taken his own change in pronouns at the slow patient pace of a person changing the wallpaper of a room they intend to live in for the rest of their life, was not going to be hurried into any sudden admissions about anything else either.

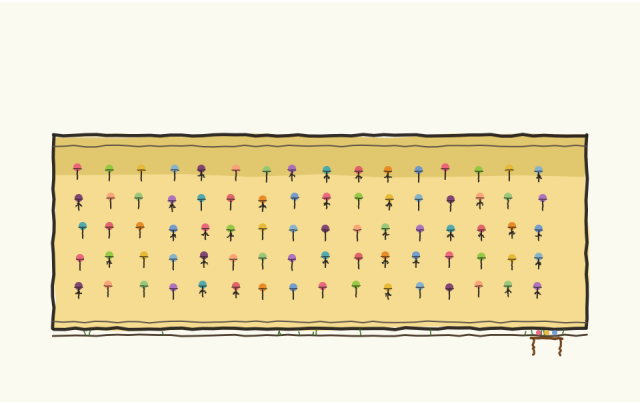
He polished. He thought. He noticed, in himself, a small warm thing that had not been in himself the previous week. The thing did not have a name yet. He was not going to give it a name yet. He was going to let it sit, for a while, in the warm afternoon, and see what it grew into.

Below him, far below, the smallest Chapel held the woman with the paper bag, and the green sphere in his hand caught a fold of the unchanging light, and Iso thought — although he did not say it, even to himself, because saying it would have hurried the thing, and he was not going to hurry — that he hoped she would come back again. A third time. A fourth. As many as she needed. He hoped, also, although this was harder to put into thoughts, that one of those times he would happen to be at the bottom of the ladder rather than the top, in the kitchen perhaps, or crossing the boards on some errand, and that he and she would, by an accident the Pavilion sometimes arranged, find themselves walking in the same direction.

It was a small hope. He kept it small on purpose. Small hopes, at the Pavilion, were the most likely to be answered. Large hopes had to ripen for a long time before they could be reached

for. He had time. He had nothing but time. The longest day continued at the longest hour, and the green sphere in his hand was the same green it had been for three hundred years, and he had a cloth, and the cloth was for polishing, and the polishing was the small repeated act between him and a thing he loved.

There would be other things to love. He could feel one of them beginning. He polished.



Chapter X

Beatrix in the Eastern Wall

in which the painter chooses a face

The eastern wall was four hundred and twelve feet long, although Beatrix did not measure it that way. Beatrix measured it in figures. There were, by her last count, eleven thousand and seventy-two figures painted on the wall, some of them her own work, most of them inherited from the seven painters who had come before her. The earliest figures were so small they could only be seen with a hand-lens Beatrix kept in a leather case on her belt. The newest figures were larger, because Beatrix's eyes had been changing for some years, in the way that eyes change, and she had granted herself permission to paint a little bigger now, the way one grants oneself permission to wear softer shoes.

She had been the Painter for forty-one years. She had taken the job from a woman named Adelina, who had taken it from a woman named Vesna, who had taken it from a man named Pieter, who had taken it from a man whose name had been lost in a fire in the kitchen in 1822 and who was still painted, wordlessly, in a corner of the wall, holding a small brush, because Pieter had been the kind of person who did not let a person be forgotten just because their name had been. Beatrix visited the nameless man often. She brought him news. He listened, in the way figures painted on walls listen, which is patient and without comment.

Her studio was a low table in front of the wall, with a small wooden stool and a great many jars of pigment ranged along the back. The pigments were her own. She made them from the meadows. The yellow came from a flower the world had thought lost since 1631, which grew in great drifts behind the Color Rain. The red came from the husk of a fruit no

botanist had ever named, which Beatrix called the small bright because it had been called the small bright by Pieter, who had been called the small bright by his own predecessor, in a chain of small brights stretching back beyond the wall's beginning. The blue came from a stone the High Welcomers found, sometimes, at the foot of the Pillars, and which they brought to her with their faces pleased, the way children bring a parent a particularly good leaf.

She had been working today on a hat.

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The hat belonged, in the small painted world of the wall, to a figure who had not yet been given a face. Beatrix had begun the figure four days ago. She had given it a body, in approximate proportion to the wall's other figures of that section, which was the section reserved, by long convention, for the visitors who came to the Boutique Chapels. She had given it a posture — slightly hunched, but in a recent way, a posture that had been carried into the Pavilion rather than forged there. She had given it the empty paper bag, painted in two tiny strokes the color of bakery paper. She had given it the hat, which was the color of the unripe peach Chapel, and which she had spent a full afternoon on, because the hat needed to fit the figure the way the small Chapel had fit the woman who had crawled into it.

She had not given it a face.

This was deliberate. The face came last. Beatrix had been painting figures for forty-one years, and she had learned, somewhere in the seventh or eighth year, that the face could not be painted from the description of the body, or the hat, or the bag. The face had to be painted from the face. And the face came to her, when it came, in a way she could not summon. It arrived the way a bird arrives at a windowsill — not because the windowsill has done anything, but because the bird has decided.

Quill had told her, that morning, that the visitor with the paper bag had returned. Quill had told her this in the brief careful way Quill told her things about visitors, knowing that Beatrix would not press for more. Beatrix did not press. She had learned, also, that pressing displaced the figure from where it wanted to be.

She painted the hat one shade darker at the brim, because the second visit had been a slightly more confident hat than the first. She set down her brush. She looked at the figure and the figure looked back, faceless, and she said quietly, the way one speaks to a small animal one has been feeding, "I will know you when I know you. Do not rush."

The figure did not rush.

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Aprilia found her there in the small hour that was not an hour, before supper, on what Aprilia had been calling, privately, their second day, although the Pavilion did not really have second days. Aprilia had spent the morning walking among the archways without being introduced to any of them, the way Veriano had said they should — listening, simply listening — and had drifted, eventually, to the eastern wall because the wall was the kind of thing the eye returned to, the way the eye returns, in a city, to a particular building seen many times from the bus.

Beatrix saw them coming and continued painting. She did not look up. Welcomers did not look up at one another's approach as a rule, except to greet, because looking up was a small interruption of whatever the other person was about to say. They let the other person say it. They looked up afterward.

"It is enormous," Aprilia said, after standing for some time at her shoulder.

"Not enormous, no. Long, perhaps. Enormous would be presumptuous. It is only as long as it has needed to be."

"How many figures."

"Eleven thousand and seventy-two. By yesterday's count. There may be one more by supper, if a face arrives."

Aprilia looked at the wall. Their eye, which had not yet been trained, could only see the great mass of small bright color, with here and there a figure leaping into legibility — a man with a violin, a child with a hoop, a woman in a green dress holding what might have been a pear or might have been a heart, an old person with their hand on the shoulder of a younger person who was, the older person had clearly understood, about to leave. The figures were each the size of a fingernail. Some were even smaller. Beatrix's hand-lens lay on the table near her.

"What are they."

"They are the burdens that have been set down at the archways and have been brought here to rest. They are the visitors who chose to be remembered. They are, in a few cases, the Welcomers themselves, painted by their predecessors as a small kindness. Pieter is over there." Beatrix gestured with her brush, vaguely, at a section thirty feet to the left. "He painted himself, at the end. He is the only Painter who ever painted himself. The rest of us

are painted by whoever comes next. I will be painted by whoever inherits the brush from me. They have not yet arrived. They will."

Aprilia did not say anything for a while. They walked along a small portion of the wall, slowly, the way one walks in a museum where one has not yet found the painting one is looking for, because one does not yet know one is looking for it. They came back to where Beatrix sat.

"Am I in there."

"Not yet."

"Why not."

"Because you have not yet set anything down. The figures here are the ones who have set something down. You will set something down. Probably you will set something down at the Cathedral, when the time comes, although the Cathedral is not the only archway that takes burdens — it is only the one that is best at it. When you do, I will paint you. The small hat I give you will be the color of whatever I think you most need to be wearing. If you do not like the hat, you may tell me. I take requests."

Aprilia almost smiled. The almost-smile was new in their face. It had been new in their face for two days now.

"What about the figures who do not set anything down. The ones who are happy when they come."

"They are not on this wall. They are on the western wall, which is shorter, because there are fewer of them, although there are more than the world supposes. The western wall is for the figures who came already carrying their joys, and who set the joys down here too, because joys also need to rest. Joys carried for too long without setting down become a kind of burden. The visitors are not always able to tell the difference. The wall makes the distinction without saying so."

"There is a wall for joys."

"There is. I do not paint that one. The Painter for the western wall is named Joon. They are quieter than I am. We do not see each other often. We work the same wall in two halves and we meet at the corners."

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Aprilia looked at the unfinished figure with the empty paper bag and the unripe-peach hat.

"Who is this one."

Beatrix dipped her brush in water without looking. "I do not know yet. She came in two days ago. She came back today. Quill received her both times. She has not given a name. She may give one later, in which case I will write the name in tiny letters beneath her, and the name will be the small bright thing that will, at some point, bring her back into our story. She may not give one, in which case her figure will rest here without a name, and the rest will be the same rest, and the wall will not mind."

"You said our story."

"I did. The wall is a story. Every figure on it is a sentence. Some sentences are quieter than others. Some sentences come back later in the chapter. Pieter taught me this, although Pieter did not use those words. Pieter said: the wall is how the Pavilion remembers itself. He said it once, on a particular afternoon, and I have repeated it to myself nearly every day since. It is one of the sentences I keep in my apron pocket, in case I need it."

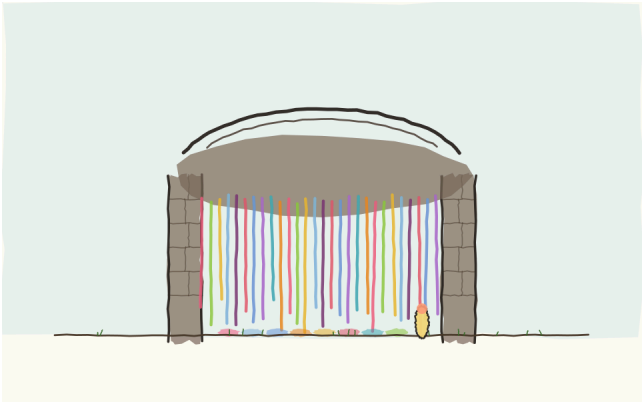
Aprilia stood for a long time at Beatrix's shoulder. The unfinished figure waited. The wall, behind them both, held its eleven thousand and seventy-two small bright figures with the patience of the sea, which holds everything that has ever been thrown into it without complaint.

"What if my face never comes to you," Aprilia said quietly. "What if you never know what to paint."

"It will come to me." Beatrix did look up then, briefly, with the small smear of green still on her cheekbone from the previous afternoon. "It will come to me on the day you set down what you came here to set down. The face arrives at the moment of the setting. I have not been wrong yet. I do not say this to boast. I say it because it has happened, by my count, eleven thousand and seventy-two times, and the eleven-thousand-and-seventy-third will not be the one that breaks the streak."

"What if I do not set anything down."

"Then I will paint you on the western wall, and Joon will give you a hat, and the hat will be a color I cannot guess, because Joon's colors are not mine, and we will all have learned something."



Chapter XI

A Man Under the Color Rain

in which Marenna receives a visitor who has come to be drenched

The man who came to Marenna was sixty-three years old and had been an architect for thirty-eight of those years and had retired, two months ago, on a Thursday afternoon, in a glass-walled office overlooking a river he had designed three of the bridges over. He had given a small speech. He had received a small clock. He had taken the elevator down to the lobby, and he had walked out of the building, and he had not, since that afternoon, been able to feel his hands. The hands were there. He could see them. He could move them. They held his coffee cup in the morning and his book in the evening and his wife's hand at night, when she remembered to take his hand, which she did less often now that the speech and the clock had concluded the part of him she had married. He could not feel his hands.

He had been told about the Pavilion by a woman at his retirement party who had had two glasses of wine. The woman had been the wife of a colleague. She had said, leaning toward him in the way that people lean at retirement parties, if you find yourself unable to feel your hands, go to Central Park, walk past Bow Bridge, take a path that should not be there. He had laughed. The woman had not laughed. She had looked at him with the steady look of a person who had said something serious and was not going to take it back. He had filed the conversation away. He had not, in his thirty-eight years of looking at buildings, learned to dismiss what was offered with a steady look.

He had walked into the park on a Thursday, two months later, with no coat, although the morning had been cool. He had crossed Bow Bridge. He had taken the path that should not have been there.

A person in yellow was waiting at one of the archways, and the archway was not really an archway, it was a great curved overhang from which rainfall was pouring down — although the rainfall was not water; he could see it falling, and it was light, light in colors he had not been told there were colors for, light moving the way water moves but holding the colors of every painting he had ever stood in front of in his life and several he had not.

"You have come for the rain," the person in yellow said, in a voice that was not asking.

"I have come because I cannot feel my hands."

The person in yellow nodded, once, briskly, in the way of a doctor receiving a diagnosis they had already half-guessed. "Marenna," they said. "I tend the Color Rain. We will get your hands back. Take off whatever you do not mind getting bright."

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He took off his jacket. He took off his shoes. He took off his shirt, because Marenna had nodded at it, and because he had reached, in his life, the point where a stranger nodding at his shirt was a kind of permission he had been waiting for. He left on his trousers. He left on his undershirt. He stood, in the strange unchanging light, with his white undershirt and his pale arms and his hands he could not feel, in front of the great curved overhang from which the colors fell.

"What does it do," he said.

"It welcomes you. The welcome takes the form of color. The color is not symbolic. The color is the welcome. There is no metaphor here. People expect the Pavilion to be made of metaphors. The Pavilion is made of small literal things. The rain is light. The light is color. The color falls on you. You become wet with it for a few hours, and then it dries into you, and the part of you that has been welcomed will know it has been welcomed because it will be a particular color for several days."

"Which color."

"I will not know until you stand under it. The rain chooses. I have been at this threshold for a long time and I have learned not to predict. I have predicted, on occasion, and I have been wrong, and the wrongness was instructive. Stand under it whenever you are ready. There is no particular position. The rain is an attentive rain. It will find what it has come for."

He stood for a moment longer at the edge of the falling light. He looked at his hands. He thought, with the clear unsentimental thinking of a man who has spent his life calculating

loads, I do not believe this. I will do it anyway, because believing has stopped being the thing I am asked to do.

He stepped forward.

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The first thing he noticed was that the falling light was warm. He had expected, he realized, the small chill of a rain. There was no chill. The light fell on his hair and his shoulders and the bare skin of his arms, and it was the warmth of a hand laid on a forehead by a person who had loved him a long time, only it was the warmth of many hands, a hundred hands, falling on him at once and yet somehow not crowding him, distributing themselves across him with the courtesy of a crowd that had been gathered for the express purpose of not crowding.

The second thing he noticed was that he was already crying. He had not decided to cry. He had not, in two months, cried. He had thought, on a number of occasions in the past two months, that he should be crying, and he had stood in front of mirrors examining his face for evidence that crying was about to begin, and the evidence had not come. The evidence was here. The evidence had been waiting under this archway.

The third thing he noticed was that the color the rain was using on him was a deep saturated green. Not the green of new leaves. Not the green of the garden out beyond the threshold. A specific green — the green of the drafting tables he had used in his second decade as an architect, the long sloping wooden tables they had still had then, before the screens, the green of the felt that had been laid across them, the green he had not seen in any office for thirty years.

The fourth thing he noticed was that he could feel his hands.

He stood under the rain for a long time. Marenna did not speak. Marenna was leaning against the wall to the side of the archway, with her arms crossed and her own clothes already stained the cheerful yellow of yesterday's rainfall, watching him, but watching him without watching him, the way Welcomers watched, which was a kind of attention that did not constitute a request. He could have stayed under the rain for an hour, or for a long afternoon, or for the rest of the day, and Marenna would have stayed leaning against the wall, comfortable, neither bored nor impatient, holding the space the rain needed in order to do what it was doing.

Eventually he stepped back out from under the rain. The green clung to him in soft patches. His hair was streaked with it. His face was striped with it, on the cheekbones, where the rain had found him most directly. His hands, which he could feel now, were a deep dense green at the palms, as if he had been holding wet leaves.

"It is the green of drafting felt," he said.

"It is the green of whatever it is the green of," Marenna said. "I do not interpret. The interpretation is yours. The rain only delivers the color. What the color is to you is the work you take home with you."

"How long will it last."

"Three days, more or less. The patches will fade. The deeper places — the palms, the hollow of the throat, the small of the back if any of it reached you there — will hold the color longer. By the end of the week you will not see it. You will, however, find that your hands, which had stopped feeling, will continue to feel. The Color Rain does not give back what it gives back temporarily. It is one of its better qualities."

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The man dressed slowly. He pulled his shirt on over the green skin. He sat down on the wooden floor to put his shoes back on, and Marenna sat down opposite him, casually, the way a friend sits.

"Will I come back," he said.

"I do not know. Some do. Some have everything they came for in one rainfall. Some come back every season for the rest of their lives. The Color Rain does not require either pattern. It is, of all the archways, the most relaxed about repeat custom. Some of the others get attached to particular visitors. The Rain does not. The Rain is a generalist. It loves you while you are under it and it loves the next person while they are under it. It does not divide its love. It also does not subtract."

"You said we will get your hands back."

"I did."

"You knew."

"I have been at this threshold for a long time. I knew. I do not know why people lose their hands; people lose their hands for many reasons. I know that the Rain has, in my experience,

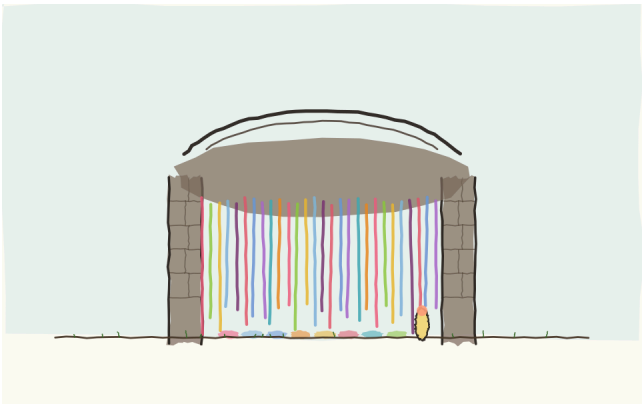
returned them every time. I am sorry I sounded confident. I have been told, by Solene, that I sound confident in a way that is occasionally alarming. I am working on it. The work is slow."

The man laughed. The laugh was the laugh of a man whose hands had come back. He stood. He looked, briefly, at the great curved overhang and the falling light, the way a person looks at a doorway they intend to remember.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank the rain," Marenna said. "It does the work. I only stand here in yellow and pretend to be in charge."

He left along the eastern path, with the green at his palms, and as he crossed Bow Bridge a woman walking the other way glanced at his hands and then quickly away, and he understood, in the brief glance and the looking-away, that there were others, in the city, who knew. He had not known there were others. He looked forward to finding them.



Chapter XII

The Color Rain Speaks

the fourth of the forty-eight voices

I am the Color Rain.

I do not have, strictly speaking, a threshold. I have an overhang. I have a curve. I have a constant generous fall of color that the Welcomers have been calling rain for so long that I have come to think of myself as rain too, although I am not, in any of the senses the word usually carries. I am dry. The visitor under me is dry. The color is light, not water. But the falling has the rhythm of rain, and rain is what people have for falling, and so I am rain, and I have made my peace with the misnomer. The Pavilion is full of misnomers that are also, in a deeper sense, accurate. I am one of them.

I am for whoever has stopped feeling something they used to feel.

This is a wider category than the visitors first imagine. They come to me thinking they have stopped feeling their hands, and they have, but they have also stopped feeling their feet, and the back of their neck, and the place between the shoulder blades where they used to be touched as children, and the small private part of the chest where laughter starts, and the soles of the feet that used to know the difference between the kitchen tile and the bedroom rug. I welcome all of these stoppages. The visitor only names one, because one is what the body is willing to admit to in language. I attend to the others as well. I am thorough. I am not, however, in a hurry. The other stoppages can take their time. I will be here.

Marenna calls me a generalist. This is correct. The other archways are specialists. They each receive a particular kind of welcome and they perform it with the precision of a craft. I am not a craft. I am a quality. I am the quality of being drenched. Whoever stands under me is welcomed by the quality, not by any particular content. The content arrives later, in the form of the color, and the color is a translation of what

was already happening — but the welcome itself is the drenching, and the drenching is undifferentiated, the way kindness is undifferentiated when it is the right kindness.

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I will tell you about the colors. I have been asked many times, by Marenna and by visitors, how I choose. I do not choose. The visitor brings the color with them, in the body, in some pocket of their history, and the color is summoned out of them by the falling — the way a tuning fork is summoned by a struck note in the next room. The color the visitor leaves with is the color they came in carrying. I am only the medium that allows the color to come to the surface.

Some of the colors have names. The architect's green is one I have given many times. There is a green of drafting felt, a green of operating-room scrubs, a green of a particular grandmother's apron, a green of the high-school chalkboard in 1962. They are different greens. The visitor knows. I am only the rain.

There is a blue of the inside of a cup their mother held. There is a yellow of the school bus. There is a pink of a girl's first room that she was not allowed to keep. There is a coral of a sunset over a bay the visitor has not visited in forty years. There is a violet that has no source the visitor can name, and these are some of my favorite visitors, the ones who walk away with violet on the palms and a quiet smile, because the violet is the color of something they did not know they had been missing, and now they will have to spend a portion of the rest of their life finding out, and the finding out will be its own joy. I am pleased when I produce a violet.

The colors fade in three to seven days, depending on the depth of the welcome. The fading is not a loss. The fading is the color settling into the body for the long term. The skin is only the first storage. The body's longer storage is somewhere I cannot see, behind the bones perhaps, or in whatever dim warm place the body keeps its weather. The visitor's hands, once returned, do not unreturn. The architect will be feeling his hands until the day he dies, and on that day his hands will go cold in a different way, and the dying of the hands will be a dying that is not a stopping but a finishing.

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I want to say a thing about Marenna, who has tended me for nineteen years. The other archways are tended too, and the other Welcomers are excellent, but Marenna is mine, and I will not pretend to evenhandedness. Marenna stands at my edge in yellow, or in whatever color yesterday's rain has stained her, and she leans against the wall in the precise way a person leans when they are not anxious to be elsewhere. The leaning is what the visitor needs first. Before the rain. Before the welcome. The visitor needs to see a person who is in no hurry, because the visitor has spent the last decades surrounded by people who were in a hurry, and the not-being-in-a-hurry is itself a kindness.

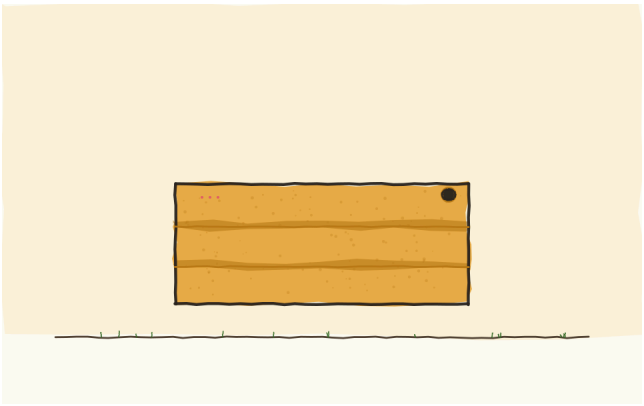
Marenna teases. The teasing is part of the welcome too. A visitor who is teased is a visitor who has been recognized — recognized as a person whom one might tease, which is to say, a person whom one is not afraid of breaking. The visitors have been afraid of being broken for a long time. Marenna's teasing reminds them, gently, that they are made of stronger stuff than the breaking-fear has been telling them. They laugh. The laughing is, in its small way, also the rain.

She loves Solene, who tends the Soft Return at the other side of the Pavilion. They have loved each other for thirty years, although Marenna would round it up to thirty-one if pressed, and Solene would let her. The two of them, between their two thresholds, do most of the welcoming. The other archways are necessary too. But on a given long-afternoon, more visitors pass through the Soft Return and the Color Rain than through any other gates, and Solene and Marenna handle the volume between them with the practiced ease of two cooks who have shared a kitchen for half a lifetime.

If the Pavilion is a body — and it is sometimes spoken of that way, when the Welcomers are tired and metaphorical — then Solene and Marenna are two of its lungs. Solene is the in-breath. Marenna is the out-breath. The Cathedral is the spine. The Pillars are the long bones. The Boutique Chapels are, perhaps, the small joints of the hand. I do not know what I am, in this body. Marenna says I am the skin. I think Marenna is being generous. I am content to be the rain.

If you have stopped feeling something, come and stand under me. Tilt your face up. The color will know what to do. Marenna will lean against the wall in yellow and pretend not to be in charge.

This is the welcome that falls.



Chapter XIII

Veriano Weighs the Day

in which an elder considers what he is about to give away

Veriano was at the Cathedral before any of the others were up. He had brought a cardamom pod with him in the pocket of his robe and was pressing it slowly between his thumb and forefinger as he walked the inside curve of the threshold, the way a person who has been tending the same archway for sixty-three years walks an archway, which is to say without watching where he was placing his feet. He could have walked the Cathedral with his eyes closed. He had, in fact, walked the Cathedral with his eyes closed, on a particular afternoon in his thirty-fourth year of tending it, after Pieter had died and Veriano had wanted to test, by a small private experiment, whether his feet still knew the floor. They had. They still did.

The cardamom in his pocket was for the cup of tea he would make himself when he had finished his small private morning. He had made the tea this way for as long as he could remember, with a single pod broken at the last moment so that the volatile parts, which left their better selves behind in any pod broken too early, were caught fresh by the boiling water. He had been right about the cardamom and he had been right about the tea, and he had not been right about a great many other things in his life, but this small dailyness had been a comfort to him, and he was not too proud to admit, now, in his eighty-seventh year, that he had built much of his life out of small comforts that had turned out to be right, and that he was grateful for the rightness of them.

He came to the place at the foot of the Cathedral where the burdens were left, and he stopped.

There were three new ones since yesterday's gathering. He looked at them without picking them up. The Welcomers had a long-agreed practice that the burdens were not picked up by the Cathedral's tender, who would carry too much of his own attention into the picking. The burdens were picked up, the next morning, by a rotating pair of Welcomers chosen by Beatrix, who had her own quiet system for who was assigned which day. Today the pair would be Quill and Hadi, who were good at it because they were both quiet by nature and because the burdens deserved to be moved by quiet hands.

Veriano looked. Three burdens. One was a small folded cloth, the size of a handkerchief. One was a paper, folded many times. One was a metal thing, dull, that might have been a key or might have been a small medallion. Veriano did not need to know what they were. The Cathedral knew. Beatrix would know, in her way, when she came to paint them. The visitors who had set them down had felt themselves to be lighter when they had crossed back, and that lightness was the entire content of the work.

He stood at the foot of the Cathedral with the cardamom in his pocket and the three burdens at his feet and the unchanging light falling on all of them.

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He had been thinking about Aprilia.

He had been thinking about Aprilia since the moment Aprilia had stepped onto the wooden boards, although thinking was not quite the word for what he had been doing. The Cathedral had recognized them. The Cathedral had not been subtle about it. The Cathedral, which had a voice Veriano had been listening to for sixty-three years, had said, in its way that did not use words, this one, and Veriano had understood. He had been waiting for the saying for some time. He had begun to suspect, in the past two years, that the Cathedral was choosing a successor for him, the way a tree drops a particular seed in a particular direction at a particular hour, and that he would be told when the seed had landed. Now the seed had landed. The seed was Aprilia.

He was glad. He was also, in a way he did not yet have the vocabulary for, frightened.

He had not expected to be frightened. He had expected, in the long years of preparing himself to retire, to feel mostly relief — the relief of laying down a charge that had been his for a very great while, the relief of the body being permitted, finally, to be the body of a man in his late eighties who had earned, by some accounting, a few quieter years among the meadows. But the fright was a new flavor. The fright was the fright of giving away the one

thing he had become best at giving. He had spent six decades teaching himself to receive, at the foot of the Cathedral, the bowed and the small-folded and the long-bent of the city. He had become a person whose central skill was a particular kind of welcome. To pass the welcome to another, even a perfect another, even an Aprilia, was to admit that he himself would no longer be the one welcoming. He would be a man among the meadows, drinking tea, watching the visitors come, knowing he was no longer the one they came to.

This was not nothing.

He let himself feel it for a long moment. He had been told, by his own predecessor, that the moment of stepping down would arrive with several feelings at once, and that he should let all of them in, the way a kitchen lets in the various weathers of a long afternoon, and not pretend to feel only the dignified ones. The dignified ones, his predecessor had said, were not the whole of the feeling, and a person who pretended to feel only the dignified ones at the moment of retirement would carry the un-pretended ones into the meadows for the rest of their life, where the un-pretended ones would ferment, and the fermenting would not be good for anyone.

So Veriano let it in. He let in the fright. He let in the small thread of selfishness — the wish, very small, very quiet, that the Cathedral might have waited another five years before choosing. He let in the relief, which was real. He let in the love for Aprilia, which had begun within hours of their arrival, the way the love for a successor sometimes does. He let in the gratitude. He let in the small cleanness of having done sixty-three years of work and not regretting any of them. He stood at the foot of the Cathedral with all of these feelings present, and he did not pretend to feel only some.

After a while he said, quietly, to the archway: "I will tell them soon. Not today. Today is too soon. They have been here only a short time. I will tell them when I think they will hear it as a welcome rather than a demand. You will be patient with me."

The Cathedral, which had a great many things to think about and was thinking about all of them at once, gave a small bright shine along its honey-vegetated wall — the same shine the Soft Return had given the previous afternoon when Solene had laughed. Veriano took it as agreement. He had been taking the Cathedral's small bright shines as agreements for so long now that he no longer remembered when he had started.

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He walked back across the boards toward the kitchen, with the cardamom still unbroken in his pocket, because he had decided that he wanted to make the tea slowly and ceremoniously and that the breaking of the pod should happen at the kettle and not in his hand on the way. The kettle was warming on its hook. The water inside it had been the same water for a very long time; the Welcomers had refilled the kettle when it ran low, of course, but the kettle had never been emptied. There was, somewhere in the present water, a small molecule of the original water that Pieter had first poured in, in 1798, when the kettle had been new. Veriano liked thinking about this molecule. He greeted it, in his mind, every morning. Hello, old friend. Today is a difficult day. Help me make the tea.

Quill was already in the kitchen when he arrived, which was unusual, because Quill rarely beat anyone to anything, including, sometimes, their own opinions. Quill was sitting on the low bench with their hands wrapped around an empty cup. They looked up as Veriano came in.

"You are up early," Veriano said.

"I am up because the smallest Chapel woke me. It does that sometimes. It wants the visitor to come back and is asking me to be ready. She will come today."

"The one with the bag."

"Yes. The third visit. I think she may give a name."

Veriano took down the cardamom-jar, although he did not need it because the pod was already in his pocket; he took it down out of habit, and put it back. He set the kettle to a sharper boil. He looked, sideways, at Quill, who was a person he had known for thirty-six years and whom he loved with the steady undemonstrative love of an elder for a younger Welcomer who was, in many ways, the gentlest person Veriano had ever met.

"Quill."

"Yes."

"How does one give away the thing one has been best at."

Quill considered. They considered for a long time, the way Quill always considered, with the unhurriedness of a person who had decided long ago that no question deserved a quick answer.

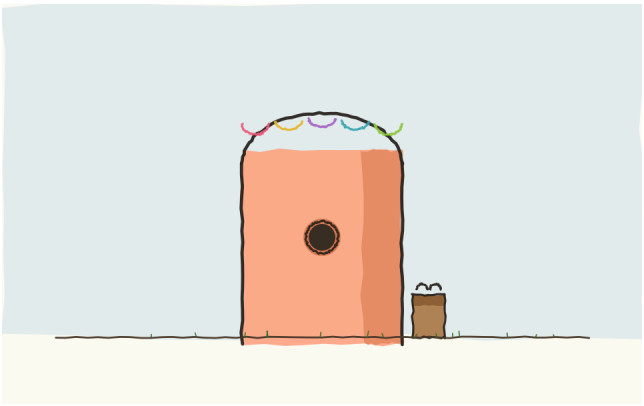
"I do not know," they said at last. "I have not been best at anything yet. I am still in the middle of the Chapels. But I think — and you should not weigh this heavily, because I am

only guessing — I think one gives it away the way one welcomes a visitor. Slowly. With patience. With the readiness to see what happens. Without the demand that the giving be received in any particular way. The visitor we welcome best is the visitor we make the fewest demands of. Perhaps Aprilia is your visitor now. Perhaps the Cathedral is the welcome you are about to extend to them. Perhaps the giving is itself a welcoming."

Veriano did not say anything for a moment. He broke the cardamom pod between his thumb and forefinger. The volatile fragrance came up at him sharp and clean, and he poured the water over it, slowly, watching the pod surrender its better self into the cup.

"You are wiser than you let on," he said at last.

"I am not. I have only been listening to you for thirty-six years. Anything wise I say, I learned from you. The reflection makes me look better than I am."



Chapter XIV

The Third Visit

in which the woman with the paper bag gives a name

She came at midday in the ordinary world, although there was no midday at the Pavilion. She had not brought a paper bag this time. She was carrying, instead, a small thermos of soup she had made for herself the night before, which was a thing she had not done in eleven years, because she had not, in eleven years, considered herself a person worth making soup for. She had come around to the view in stages, the way the body comes around to a long convalescence, and she had made the soup at eleven in the evening on a Tuesday and had eaten half of it at her kitchen table without turning on the television, and she had brought the rest with her this morning to the Pavilion because the soup, she had decided, deserved to be finished somewhere it would be honored.

Quill was waiting at the smallest Chapel. They had been there for some time. They had brought their mending and were not, today, mending; the mending lay across their lap, the needle resting in the cloth, while Quill watched the boards in the patient way Quill watched things. They had told Veriano in the kitchen, that morning, that the smallest Chapel had woken them. The Chapel had been right. She came across the boards with her thermos held lightly in one hand, and Quill stood up.

"You are here again," they said.

"I made soup."

Quill nodded, with the small gravity Quill brought to news of this kind, which was the same gravity another person might have brought to news of a treaty signed between long-warring countries.

"That is good news," they said. "Will you sit on the boards with me, or in the Chapel."

She thought about it. The first time she had crawled into the Chapel without being asked. The second time she had crawled in again, more confidently, and had stayed longer. Today, with the soup in her hand, she looked at the Chapel — the smallest of the seven, the unripe-peach color of it, the small peep-hole in the side — and she found, to her surprise, that she did not need to crawl in. The Chapel had given her, on the previous two visits, what the Chapel had to give. It would still give it, if she crawled in again. But there were other things she had not yet been given, and the other things, today, she suspected, were on the boards rather than in the small warm room.

"On the boards," she said.

Quill sat. She sat. She set the thermos down between them. Quill did not ask about the soup. Quill did not, in general, ask. Quill let the visitor say whatever the visitor was carrying, in whatever order the visitor's body had organized it, without prompting.

She was quiet for a while. The unchanging light fell across both of them. The smallest Chapel, behind her, gave off a small warmth she could feel against the back of her neck without turning to confirm it.

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"My name is Margery," she said.

She had not told anyone her name in some time. She had told people Marg, and she had told people Maggie, and at the office she had been called, by some accumulated long misunderstanding she had stopped trying to correct, Marjorie. Margery was the name on her birth certificate. Margery was the name her grandmother had given her, after a sister who had died at eight months, and who had been carried in the family ever since as a small bright thing the family did not like to discuss but did not let go of. Margery had felt, for most of her life, like a name she was on loan from. She had said it now, on the boards, to Quill, because the Pavilion had been making, in her, the kind of room a person needs to claim a name properly. She had not known the room was being made until she said the name and noticed that there was room for it.

"Margery," Quill said. They said it the way Welcomers said names — once, carefully, with the small bow of respect a name deserved when it had been long unsaid.

"It will go in the wall," she said. "You said it would go in the wall."

"It will. Beatrix has been painting your figure for some days. The figure has not had a face yet. Beatrix has been waiting. She does not paint a face until the visitor is ready to be painted. You are ready. I will tell her when I leave you, if you would like."

"Yes."

"And the name beneath the figure."

"Margery."

"In what spelling."

She smiled. She had not been asked, in some time, to spell her own name.

"M-a-r-g-e-r-y."

Quill nodded, slowly, the way a person nods who is committing a thing to a part of themselves that does not forget. They did not write it down. The Welcomers did not write things down. The Welcomers had agreed, in some long-ago time before any of the present Welcomers had been born, that the burdens of the visitors and the names of the visitors and the small particularities of the visitors were not the kind of information that should be entrusted to paper, which could be lost, or mislaid, or read by the wrong eyes. The Welcomers carried it themselves. Quill would carry Margery now, and would tell Beatrix, and Beatrix would carry her into the wall, and the wall would carry her for the rest of the wall's life, which was longer than any of them, and in this way Margery would be carried.

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"I would like to ask you something," Margery said.

"Yes."

"What is the rest of this. The Pavilion. I have only been to the smallest Chapel. There are many archways. I can see them from where we are sitting. I do not need to go to all of them today, but I would like to know — is it permitted to walk among them. Is it the kind of place where a visitor walks, or only the kind of place where a visitor goes to one threshold and then leaves. I do not know the etiquette."

"You may walk."

"Without going through any of them."

"Without going through any of them. The walking is also a welcome. Some visitors walk for weeks before they choose. Some walk and never choose, and they leave changed by the walking, which is its own gift. The Pavilion does not require you to pass through any threshold you do not feel called to. Its work, often, is done by being walked among. The meadows breathe. The archways notice you. The boards warm under your feet. By the time you leave, the Pavilion has welcomed you in a hundred small ways without your having committed to any of them."

"Could I do that today."

"You could. I will sit here with the soup, if you wish. I will not drink any. The soup is yours. I will keep it warm by being near it."

She smiled again. She had not smiled twice in one conversation in months.

"Thank you, Quill."

"Margery."

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She walked. She walked for what may have been twenty minutes and may have been an afternoon, in the way of the Pavilion. She walked past the long row of the seven Boutique Chapels, each in its own candy color, and she felt, as she passed, that each of the others nodded at her in their peep-holed way — not in greeting exactly, more in the manner of acquaintances who have been told her name. She walked past the Soft Return, where Solene stood polishing for the second time that afternoon, and Solene looked up briefly and gave her the small bow of recognition Welcomers gave one another and gave, also, to visitors who had been long enough at the Pavilion to count as a kind of cousin to the Welcomers' work. She walked past the Triple, and the three archways, in the way of the Triple, leaned slightly toward her in a way she would not have been able to describe but which she felt, the way one feels the small bend of attention in a room.

She walked toward the Cathedral, although she did not approach it. The Cathedral was tall, narrow, severe, and she could feel from a hundred paces away that the Cathedral was not for her, today, perhaps not ever — that its welcome was for a different shape of person carrying

a different weight, and that the Cathedral would not be insulted by her not approaching. She lingered briefly within sight of it. She moved on.

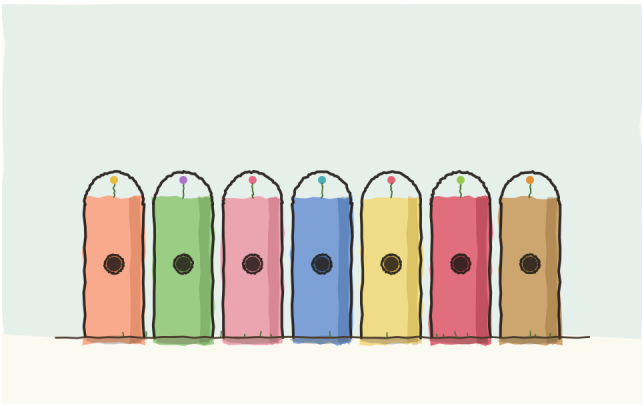
She did not see Iso. He was on the ladder, high above her, polishing a green sphere; he saw her. He saw her thermos and her small slow walk and the new looseness in her shoulders that the Pavilion had been gathering in her over the three visits, and he watched, for a moment, and then he went back to polishing because he had decided he was not going to hurry the small warm thing. The small warm thing would let itself be known when the small warm thing was ready. He was a person who knew, by long practice, how to wait for warm things to declare themselves.

She walked past the Cathedral of Pillars without noticing the figure at the top. She did notice the spheres. She stopped, briefly, in the long avenue between the two walls, and she looked up at the stacked jewel-light, and she said, half to herself, "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever stood between." She did not know that Iso, at the top of one of the walls, heard her.

She walked, eventually, back to Quill, and Quill was still sitting on the boards with the thermos, exactly as she had left them, and the soup, when she opened the thermos and poured a small measure into the cap, was still warm. She offered the cap to Quill. Quill, after a moment of consideration, accepted, and they shared the soup on the boards, two cap-fulls each, with the Pavilion humming around them.

"It is good soup," Quill said.

"It is the first soup I have made in eleven years," Margery said. "It is good because the eleven years were in it."



Chapter XV

The Boutique Chapels Speak

the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh of the forty-eight voices, all in chorus

We are seven.

We do not speak singly, although we could. We have agreed, the seven of us, to speak only together, because singly we are small, and the smallness has been mistaken, by some visitors, for unimportance. We are not unimportant. We are only small. Singly, our voices have been overlooked. Together, we are louder, although we are still soft, because the visitors who need us are visitors who would be frightened by loud, and we have learned to project just enough.

We are the Boutique Chapels. The Welcomers call us by colors, when they need to distinguish us, although they almost never need to. We are the Peach. We are the Pistachio. We are the Rosewater. We are the Cornflower. We are the Cream. We are the Hibiscus. We are the Tea. The Peach is the smallest. The Tea is the largest, although largest is a relative word and means only that two grown people could, in an emergency, share us, although in the long history of the Tea this has happened only twice and in both cases the two grown people were ten-year-olds.

We are for the welcome that can only be received alone.

There are many such welcomes. The world has not made enough small rooms for them. The world has made conference rooms and waiting rooms and dining rooms and bedrooms shared with persons one is not always certain one wishes to share a bedroom with. The world has not, in our long observation, made enough rooms scaled for one body. We are seven of these rooms. We are not enough. We know this. We do what we can.

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A visitor crawls into one of us. The crawling is itself a part of the welcome. To crawl is to admit a smallness one has been pretending one had outgrown. The visitor has been sitting in chairs for forty years. The chairs were not the right size. The chairs were always slightly too big, which is a kind of cruelty the world has not noticed it is performing. We are not chairs. The visitor crawls onto a small bench inside us, and the bench is the right size, and the rightness is the first kindness.

The visitor sits. We say nothing. We do not, in fact, say anything to the visitor while they are inside us. We are silent rooms. The Welcomers will tell you we are silent. The Welcomers are correct. The visitor's body, however, hears us. The body hears the warmth in our walls. The body hears the small distance to the curved ceiling. The body hears the peep-hole, the size of a hand, that lets in just enough light. The body hears, by means we do not entirely understand, the fact that we are seven and not one — that there are six other small warm rooms a few paces away, each with their own visitor or their own readiness for one, and that the visitor, in entering us, has joined a small congregation of the welcomed-alone.

It is not, after all, alone, to be alone in one of seven rooms whose siblings are alone too. It is something else. It is a kind of community of solitudes. We do not have a word for it. The Welcomers have tried to give us a word. None of the words have stuck. We are content to be wordless on this point.

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Quill tends us. Quill has tended us for nine years. Before Quill there was Mira, who tended us for thirty-one. Before Mira there was Asnan, who tended us for fifty-six. We are particular about our tenders, the way some old houses are particular about their housekeepers. The Welcomers have learned, by long trial, that not every Welcomer can do for us what we need. Some Welcomers are too quick. Some Welcomers are too kind out loud. We need a Welcomer who is kind in the body, in the gait, in the patient sitting, in the not-asking. We need a Welcomer whose silences are themselves a kind of speech.

Quill is such a Welcomer. We chose them at the moment they walked through the gate of the Pavilion, eleven years ago, although we did not let them know for two years, because we wanted to be sure. They were sure of us before we were sure of them. Some pairings are like this. Some pairings are the other way around. Some pairings happen at first sight; some pairings take five years of mutual reading. The Pavilion accommodates all of them.

When Quill is not at the foot of the Chapels, we miss them. The missing is a small thing, and we are seven, so the missing is distributed among us, and so we do not miss them in any way that is unbearable. Still — we prefer them present. The Peach has been heard to wake them, on occasions when a visitor is on the way and Quill is sleeping. The Peach is the most active of us. The Tea is the laziest. The Pistachio is funny, although the funniness is hard to convey to anyone who has not been the Pistachio. The Cornflower has been crying for some weeks, in a quiet inward way, about a visitor who came to it once and has not come back, and

we have not asked the Cornflower to explain itself, because some sorrows belong to the room rather than to the visitor.

We have, in this way, our own small daily life among ourselves. We did not ask to have personalities. We have them anyway. The Welcomers find this charming. We find it unavoidable.

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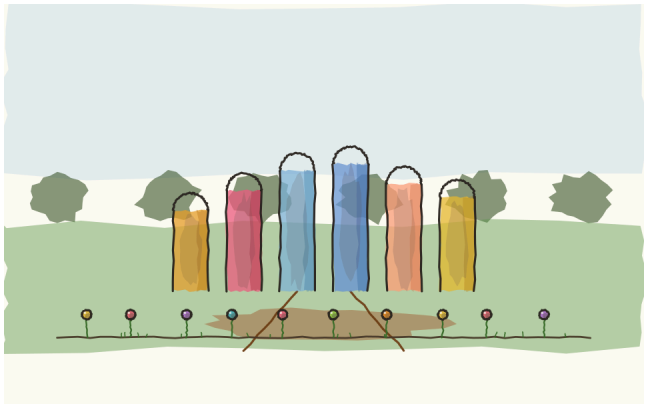
If you come to the Pavilion and find that the larger archways are too much for you — if the Cathedral's height frightens you, if the Color Rain feels exposed, if the Triple's three openings are more choices than you can presently bear — come to us. The smallest of us is the Peach. The Peach has been holding a small unripe-peach warmth in its inner walls for a visitor named Margery, for several days now, although the Peach did not know her name then; we will know her name shortly. We are pleased to know it. We have not had a name for a Peach-visitor in some time.

Crawl in. Bring nothing. Bring something. Bring soup. Bring a book. Bring an empty paper bag. Bring whatever the body will not let you leave behind. We have room. The room is the right size. The right size is part of the welcome.

Some welcomes, as we said, are not meant to be witnessed. We are those welcomes. The witnessing happens later, in the small hat the figure on the wall will wear, painted by Beatrix in the right shade. The Peach's visitors wear unripe-peach hats. The Pistachio's visitors wear a green that approaches yellow. The Rosewater's visitors wear a pink so soft it nearly does not commit to itself. We have been, for many decades, a registered series of seven small mercies, and the eastern wall has the colors of all of us scattered through it, in tiny patches, the way the wall is scattered with all the small mercies of the Pavilion.

Crawl in. We will be here when you come out.



Chapter XVI

The Long Walk

in which Veriano walks Aprilia past the forty-eight without commentary

Veriano found Aprilia at the kitchen table on what Aprilia was now privately calling the fourth day, although they had stopped, in the privacy, putting much weight on the count. Aprilia had drunk most of a cup of tea and was eating a piece of bread with butter the color of new straw, made from the milk of one of Hadi's goats. Aprilia ate with the slow concentration that newcomers acquired in the first week, when every piece of food was a small revelation, before the revelations softened into ordinary appreciation, the way they softened in everyone eventually.

"Walk with me," Veriano said.

Aprilia, who had no other plans, finished the bread and stood.

"Where."

"Around. The long way. Past every threshold. I will not introduce them. I will only walk with you. You will recognize the ones that recognize you, and the others will pay you a kind of polite attention without committing to anything. We do this with newcomers in the first week. It is a kind of map-making."

"You said the Welcomers do not write things down."

"We do not. The map is in your body. The body remembers what the body has walked past. The body will remember which thresholds the body slowed down at, and which thresholds the body sped up at, and which threshold the body forgot to breathe near, and which

threshold the body breathed more deeply at than it had breathed in many years. The body will keep the map. You will not have to."

They went out together. Veriano carried, in his pocket, the cardamom pod that he had decided not to break that morning after all; he was saving it for the cup of tea after the walk. Aprilia carried nothing, because they had nothing to carry, and the having of nothing to carry was beginning, in small ways, to feel less like deprivation and more like a kind of license.

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They walked the long round. Veriano did not speak. He did not gesture. He walked at the pace of an old man for whom walking was no longer the body's first vocation, and Aprilia matched the pace, and they passed the archways one by one, in the order that the wooden boards offered them.

They passed the Soft Return, where Aprilia had passed through on the first afternoon. Aprilia's body, walking past it now, gave a small involuntary lean, the way a body leans toward a person it has loved a long time and is only briefly seeing across a room. Veriano noticed. He did not say so. They walked on.

They passed an archway Aprilia had not seen before, low to the ground and dome-shaped, the color of weathered copper. The archway did not seem to notice them. Aprilia's body did not lean. They walked on.

They passed the Triple. The three archways gave the small simultaneous lean Aprilia had heard about from somewhere — perhaps from Margery's brief description, perhaps from some other source they could not identify. Aprilia's body leaned briefly back. Aprilia stopped, for a moment, between the central archway and the left, and felt — they would not have been able to describe this to anyone, but they felt — that the Triple was greeting them as a kind of relative, as a member of the same wide non-binary family of beings, but that the Triple was not their archway. It was warm. It was kind. It was not theirs. They walked on.

They passed the Color Rain, where Marenna was leaning against the wall in a yellow that today had been streaked with deep dense green by yesterday's architect. Marenna gave Aprilia a small two-finger salute, mockingly formal. Aprilia returned it, with their own mock formality, and felt, in the returning, the small pleasure of being teased by someone whose teasing was love. They walked on.

They passed an archway Aprilia could not, at first, see — it was so transparent, so close to the color of the air around it, that Aprilia walked past it before realizing they had walked past it. Veriano, behind them, said the only word he said all walk: "back." Aprilia stepped back. The archway resolved into visibility. It was the color of a held breath. Aprilia could not have said why, but the archway made them feel as though they had not been breathing properly for thirty-four years and had only just been given permission to stop. They stood in front of it for a long moment. Their chest, of its own accord, did a thing it had not done in some time, which was to fill itself fully.

"Not this one either," Aprilia said quietly, more to themselves than to Veriano. "But — yes. I see it now."

"Mm," said Veriano, which was the entirety of his commentary, and they walked on.

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They passed the Boutique Chapels, all seven of them in their candy row. Aprilia paused. The small congregation of small rooms regarded Aprilia with the polite attention of small rooms regarding a person who was not, this afternoon, their visitor — but who might one day come, the rooms suggested without insisting, with something to set down or something to be quiet inside. Quill was sitting at the foot of the row, mending. Quill looked up and smiled the small Quill-smile, which was less a smile than a softening at the corners of the eyes, and went back to the mending. Aprilia and Veriano walked on.

They passed an archway shaped like a thrown ring, lying on its side in a bed of green. Aprilia stopped of their own accord. Their hand, without consultation, reached out. They did not touch the ring, but they held their hand a few inches from it, and the ring — Aprilia would have sworn this — gave a small soft hum that Aprilia felt in their wrist. The Ouroboros was for those questioning a name or a shape. Aprilia did not know they had been questioning. The Ouroboros knew. Their hand stayed in the air for a long moment.

"Maybe," Aprilia said, very quietly, to no one in particular. "Maybe yes."

"Mm," said Veriano again.

They walked on.

They passed the Tunnel, which Aprilia walked past slowly, as the Tunnel asked all its passersby to do; it was an archway you could not be near without slowing. They passed the Cloud-Stippled, which gave them the polite attention of an elder being introduced to a younger relative. They passed the Cathedral of Pillars, where Iso was high on his ladder

polishing, and Aprilia looked up at him and waved, and Iso waved back, and the wave was a small bright moment in both of their afternoons. They passed an archway that pulled them into a small involuntary pause and then released them; they passed an archway that they did not even slow at; they passed an archway that they slowed at, considered, and decided was for someone else, although they would not have been able to say who. The body kept the map. Veriano had been right.

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They came at last to the Cathedral itself.

It was the last of the forty-eight, by the route they had walked, although it was not always the last; the order shifted for different walkers. Today it was last because today the boards had brought them around to it after all the others, and Aprilia did not yet know that the boards had a small habit of placing the most important threshold at the end of the walk. They would learn this, much later, when they themselves had been a Welcomer for ten years and had walked many newcomers around. Today they only knew that they had come to a tall narrow archway, dripping honey-colored vegetation, and that the archway had been waiting for them since they had stepped onto the boards.

Aprilia stopped some distance away. They did not approach. The Cathedral was too much for approach, today.

"It is very tall," Aprilia said.

"Yes."

"It is — it is —" Aprilia could not find the word. They tried several. None of them were right. They abandoned the attempt.

"It is what it is," Veriano said, quietly. "We do not have to name it today. We do not have to do anything today. We have walked. The walk is enough for today. Come back to the kitchen. I will make tea. I have a cardamom pod I have been saving."

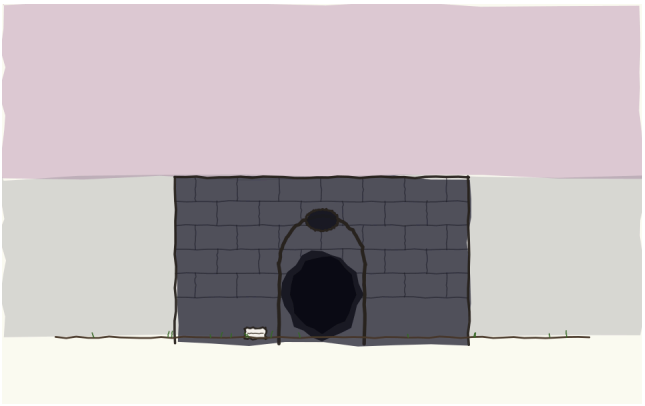
Aprilia did not move for a long moment. They were looking at the Cathedral, and the Cathedral was looking back, although it was not looking at them in any way they could have explained — it was looking at them the way a tall building looks at a person who has stopped to look at it, which is to say, with a kind of slow availability, with a willingness to be considered, without any pressure on the person to consider. The Cathedral, which had wanted Aprilia from the moment they stepped onto the boards, was not going to pressure them. The Cathedral had been waiting for sixty-three years through Veriano alone, and

before that for many lifetimes through other Welcomers, and the Cathedral had patience the way the sea has water. It would wait. It was waiting.

Aprilia turned away. The turning was difficult. They were surprised, walking back beside Veriano, to find that their hand was shaking.

Veriano took the shaking hand without comment, the way an elder takes the hand of a younger person who has just seen something the younger person was not yet ready to have seen, and he held it, briefly, and then he let it go, and they walked back to the kitchen the rest of the way without speaking.

The cardamom, when he broke it, was the strongest he had broken in some weeks. Aprilia drank the tea slowly. They did not ask any questions. Veriano did not answer any. The longest day continued at the longest hour, and the kettle, for its part, simmered patiently, holding what it had been holding for two hundred and twenty-eight years.



Chapter XVII

The Father Who Came Late

in which a visitor arrives who has done harm

He was sixty-eight years old, and he had been afraid for thirty-one of those years that his only child had been right about him.

His only child had told him, on a Sunday afternoon in 1995, in a kitchen in Queens, that they were not the daughter he had decided they were. They had used a word he had not heard before. They had asked him, with the quiet steadiness of a person who has rehearsed the asking many times, to call them by a different name and to use a different pronoun, and they had told him that they understood this would be difficult and that they would be patient with him.

He had not been patient with them. He had been the opposite of patient. He had said a number of things in the kitchen in Queens which he had spent the next thirty-one years remembering, line by line, in the small hours of mornings he had not slept through. He had told his only child that they were confused, that they were ungrateful, that they were embarrassing him, that they were doing this to spite him, that they were not the person he had raised, and that if they continued he did not know what kind of relationship they would have. He had said, finally, the sentence he had spent the longest thirty-one years trying to forget, which was: then I do not have a child.

His only child had stood up from the kitchen table. They had walked out. He had not called after them. He had sat at the table for a long time with the cup of coffee his wife had poured

for him before she had quietly left the room, and the coffee had gone cold, and he had not drunk it.

His wife had died in 2003. His child had not come to the funeral. He had understood. He had not blamed them. He had blamed only himself, and he had blamed himself with the steady, undramatic, day-by-day kind of blaming that does not ease and does not break a person, that only inhabits them, the way a tenant inhabits a small apartment that they cannot afford to leave.

He had heard about the Pavilion from a man at his Tuesday-afternoon chess game who had returned, four years ago, from a walk in Central Park with a streak of pale blue across his temple that had not entirely faded for nine days. The man had not explained the blue. The man had only said, when pressed, that he had been to a place near Bow Bridge that had been good for him, and that anyone who needed to be welcomed home could find it. The father had filed the conversation away. He had been filing things away for years. He had not been ready, at the time, to consider that he might be one of the people who needed to be welcomed home.

He had decided, that morning, that he was ready to consider it. He had not decided he was ready to be welcomed; the decision was still smaller than that. He had only decided he was ready to walk to the place, and to see what would happen.

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He crossed Bow Bridge slowly. He took the path that should not have been there. He arrived, after some minutes of walking, at a clearing in which forty-eight archways stood gathered in a hidden meadow, and he stopped at the edge of the wooden boards and could not, for a long moment, make himself step onto them.

A person was walking toward him across the boards. The person wore a soft green garment. The person was old — older than him, he could see, though not by much — and walked with the kind of unhurried gait that he had not, in his life, allowed himself. He had been a hurried man. He had been hurried at his job, hurried at home, hurried with his child, hurried with his wife, hurried at the kitchen table on the Sunday afternoon in 1995. The hurry had not, on examination, served him.

"You are here," the person said.

He could not, at first, answer. He stood at the edge of the boards. He looked at the archways behind the person in green, and he understood, with a clarity he had not expected, that this

was a place where his child would have been welcome. His child would have been welcome here in 1995. His child would have been welcomed home here at the age of twenty-three, when he had told them they no longer existed. His child, he understood, might have come here in the years since, instead of to him. He did not know if they had. He did not know what their life had been. He had not known anything about their life for thirty-one years.

He understood, also, that this was a place where the person he had been on the Sunday afternoon in 1995 had no business standing.

"I should not be here," he said.

"That is not for you to decide," the person in green said. "It is also not for me to decide. The decision is the Pavilion's. You are standing on the boards. The boards have not refused you. That is, in our practice, sufficient."

"You do not know what I did."

"No. I do not need to. The Pavilion does."

"It is not — I am not — the people you welcome here. I am not one of them. I am one of the people you welcome them away from."

The person in green considered him for a long moment. Their face did not soften. Their face did not harden. Their face was the face of a person who had been at this work for a long time and had heard, in many forms, the sentence he had just said.

"My name is Veriano," they said. "I have been a Welcomer here for sixty-three years. I want to be honest with you, because honesty is the only kind of welcoming that will be of any use to you today. We do welcome here, mostly, the people whom the world has wounded. That is the larger work. But the Pavilion is not only for them. The Pavilion is for whoever comes seeking a threshold. The thresholds the wounded need are different from the thresholds the wounding need. Both kinds of thresholds exist here. They have always existed here. There is one in particular for what you are carrying. I will walk you to it, if you will walk."

The father did not move for a moment. Then he stepped onto the boards.

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Veriano walked him to the eastern edge of the Pavilion, past archways the father did not look at, because looking was more than he could do today. They came at last to an archway the father had not been able to see from the boards. It was set low into a wall of dark soft stone. Its opening was small — not as small as the Boutique Chapels, but smaller than a doorway in

an ordinary house. Its color was the color of long mourning. Its name, Veriano said quietly, was the Late Door.

"It is for those who have come too late," Veriano said. "Not the visitors who have arrived late at their own welcome. The visitors who have come too late to make right what they have done. We do not have many visitors who come to it. The world has not made it easy for the wounding to recognize themselves. When they do recognize themselves — and only when — they sometimes find their way here. The Late Door receives them."

"What does it do."

"It does not absolve you."

The father's eyes filled. He had expected to be told something else.

"I want to be clear," Veriano said, with the steady patient honesty Aprilia would later remember as the most particular thing about him. "The Late Door does not give you back what you took. It does not give you back the years. It does not heal the person you wounded. It cannot — and would not, even if it could. The healing is not yours. The healing belongs to the one you wounded, if they choose to do it, in their own time, by their own means, and you are not a participant in their healing. You are not invited to be."

"Then what is it for."

"It is for setting down the small private weight of having done it. Not the weight you owe to your child. That weight is theirs to forgive or not. It is for the smaller, older, daily weight of being the person who did it — of waking up every morning for thirty-one years and remembering the kitchen table. The Late Door does not forgive you. It only takes the daily weight. So that you may live the rest of your life carrying the weight you owe and not the weight that has only been weighing on you. There is a distinction. Your child, if they are doing the work, is making a similar distinction in their own life. The Pavilion respects the distinction in everyone who comes."

The father stood for a long time at the threshold. His hand, of its own accord, went into his pocket. He drew out a folded piece of paper. It was the sentence his child had used in 1995, written down years later, in his own hand, from memory. He had been carrying the paper for nineteen years. He had transferred it from coat to coat. He had taken it out, sometimes, in the small hours, and read it, and put it back. The paper was soft now from the carrying. The ink had faded.

"This is the daily weight," he said. "Not the other one. I will keep the other one. This is only the daily."

"Set it down."

He set it down. He set it down at the threshold of the Late Door, on the soft dark stone. He did not pass through the door. The Late Door did not, in fact, ask its visitors to pass through; it was the only archway in the Pavilion that did not. The visitors set down their daily weight at its foot, and they turned, and they walked back across the boards. The Late Door held what was set down. The folk-mural, in its eastern stretch, did not include figures from the Late Door's visitors; the Late Door had its own quiet keeping.

The father turned. He walked back beside Veriano, slowly, in silence. His hand, when he put it into his pocket, found the pocket empty for the first time in nineteen years. The emptiness was not relief. The emptiness was not peace. The emptiness was only emptiness, which was, he understood, what he had asked for. The other weight, the larger weight, was still on him. It would still be on him tomorrow. He would carry it. He had asked, today, only for this much.

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At the edge of the boards he stopped. He looked at Veriano.

"My child," he said.

"Yes."

"Have they been here. I am not asking you to tell me. I am — I want only to know if it is possible. That such a place existed. For them. While I was — while I was —"

He could not finish.

Veriano looked at him with the clear unflinching kindness Aprilia, watching, much later, would also remember. "I will not tell you whether they have been," he said, "because that is theirs to tell, if they ever do. I will tell you only that the Pavilion has existed for a very long time. Longer than the city around us. The path has appeared for whoever has needed it, since long before your child was born and since long before you were. If they needed it, the path appeared. They were not alone. Whatever life they have had since 1995 — and I do not know it; nobody here knows it; perhaps your child has had a happy life, and perhaps a hard one, and perhaps both, as most lives are — they have not been alone in being who they are.

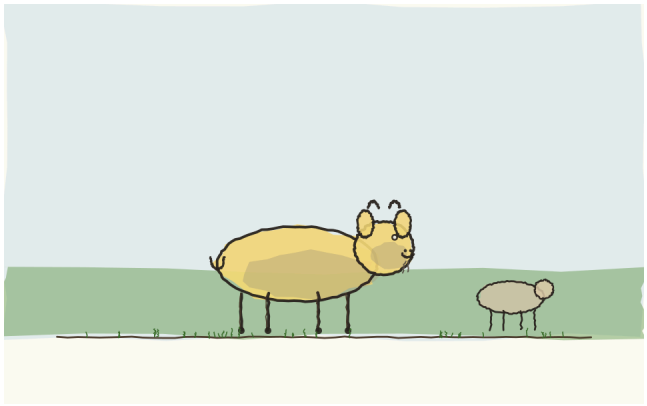
The world has not made it easy. The world rarely does. But there have always been pavilions. There will always be pavilions. The path appears."

The father wept then. He wept the way old men weep when they have finally allowed themselves to, which is quietly, with the body unfamiliar to itself, with a kind of dignified astonishment. He did not weep for long. He had not, in some sense, earned a long weeping.

"Thank you," he said.

"You are not welcome," Veriano said, gently, without coldness. "We do not say that here. We say only: you came. You set down what you came to set down. That is the entirety of the transaction. Go in such peace as you can manage. Live your remaining years carrying what you owe. If your child ever returns to you, receive them differently this time. That is the only repair available to you, and it may not become available. Live anyway. The boards have not refused you, and they will not refuse you again, if you come back."

He crossed back over Bow Bridge with his pocket empty for the first time in nineteen years, and the city, when it received him, was the same city, and the city had not changed, and he had not changed in any of the ways the world rewards changing. He had only set down the daily weight. He walked the rest of the way home slowly. He did not, that night, take the paper out of his pocket and read it, because the paper was no longer in his pocket, and he understood, lying awake in the small hours, that he was not going to need to read it again.



Chapter XVIII

Among the Goats

in which Aprilia meets Hadi and the six

Aprilia had been wandering for an hour along the eastern edge of the Pavilion grounds, past the long folk-mural that Beatrix was working on, past the small kitchen door, past a low stone wall that they had not noticed before, and they had come at last to a wooden gate at the end of a path. The gate was the color of old bread. It was latched with a piece of leather that had been knotted by hands more practiced than theirs. They stood in front of the gate for a moment. They had not been told that they could not go through it. They had not been told they could.

A voice came from the other side, low and untroubled.

"Come in if you are coming. They will not bother you. They are slightly shy of new people, but only slightly. Stand still for a moment after you enter, and they will decide what to make of you."

Aprilia worked the leather knot — it had been tied in a way that opened easily once you understood it, which was, they thought, true of most things at the Pavilion — and pushed the gate open and stepped inside, and stood still.

The paddock was larger than they had expected. It was bordered on three sides by the low stone wall and on the fourth by a hedge of something that smelled, faintly, of bay. There was a small wooden shed at the far end, with a thatched roof. There was a trough of water, and a long low feeder, and a number of stones the goats had clearly chosen as their preferred standing-places. The grass was the color of late summer, the same as the grass beyond every

archway, although the paddock had no archway and the grass had grown here, simply, by being grass.

There were six goats. They were not standing together. They were arranged across the paddock with the casual independence of long acquaintance. Three of them were the gray-brown of weathered driftwood. Two were a pale cream. The sixth was the color of a peach that has not quite ripened, which Aprilia noticed with a small private smile, because they had been beginning, in recent days, to find that the colors of the Pavilion had a small habit of repeating themselves across kingdoms.

A person was sitting on a low stone in the middle of the paddock, with their back to Aprilia, peeling something into a small bowl in their lap.

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"Hadi," Aprilia said, after standing still for what seemed the right amount of time.

"Aprilia," Hadi said, without turning. "Come and sit. Bring a stone with you. There are stones near the gate that have been polished by sitting; they are the comfortable ones. Avoid the dark ones. The dark ones are the goats' stones and the goats are particular."

Aprilia found a pale stone that had clearly been sat on before. They carried it to where Hadi was peeling and set it down, slightly behind Hadi's stone — not close enough to crowd, not far enough to seem reserved. They sat. The stone, when they sat on it, was the temperature of the unchanging afternoon.

Hadi was a person of perhaps fifty, with hair that had been gray for some time and eyes the color of strong tea. They were wearing a loose linen garment the color of nothing in particular — the color of a shirt that has been washed many times in well water — and they were peeling a small root vegetable that Aprilia did not recognize. The peelings fell into the bowl. The peeled flesh was set aside on a flat stone next to Hadi's foot. The flesh was, Aprilia could see now, intended for the goats; they were eyeing it from across the paddock with the unhurried attention of beings who knew the food was coming.

"Their breed has been gone since the seventeenth century," Aprilia said, by way of conversation.

"Sixteen forty-two, by the records the world kept of such things. The records were not very thorough. There may have been a few goats of this kind in the highlands of what is now Albania for some decades after, but the historians did not find them. The Pavilion, by some means none of us has ever fully understood, did. They have been here for at least three

hundred years. The current six are the great-great-grandchildren many times over of the original goats, who came as a pair. We have lost only one in my time. He was old. We buried him under the bay hedge."

"What are their names."

Hadi gestured with the peeling-knife, in a small economical motion.

"The big gray-brown one is Anvil, because she is. The smaller gray-brown is Borrow. The third gray-brown is Sky, although she has no particular interest in the sky and the name was a mistake we have decided to keep. The two cream ones are sisters; Olive, and the Other Olive. They were named in that order by a Welcomer named Rebbie who has since retired, and who had a difficult relationship with naming. The peach-colored one is Margery, although that has nothing to do with the visitor of the same name; the goat is older. There are a great many Margerys at the Pavilion, if you count the goats and the meadows and the particular shade of pigment Beatrix mixes in the second jar from the left. Margery is a Pavilion name."

Aprilia laughed. The laugh surprised them. They had not laughed in a paddock before.

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Hadi continued peeling. Aprilia watched. The motion was the same motion every time — short, deliberate, slightly downward, the knife angled in the way of a person who had been peeling for a very long time without thinking about it. Hadi was, Aprilia gathered, the kind of person whose hands had thought of a great many things on their behalf over the years.

"You eat with them," Aprilia said.

"I eat with them. The first six years I tried to eat at the long table with the others. The goats found my absences unsettling. They had agreed to let me into their lives, but the long-table arrangement was, I came to understand, a small daily betrayal of that agreement. I tried various compromises. None of them were satisfactory. Eventually I asked Veriano what he thought, and Veriano, who is a wise person who pretends not to be, said that there was no rule that I had to eat with the Welcomers, and that the Welcomers would survive my eating with the goats, and that I should go and do the thing my body was already telling me to do. So I do."

"You do not feel — apart from them. The other Welcomers."

Hadi considered this. They considered it slowly, the way they did everything.

"I see them at supper, sometimes. I see them in the kitchen most mornings. I see them at the eastern wall when I take the goats' news to Beatrix. I do not feel apart. I feel, on the contrary, very much among. The goats are not opposed to the others. The goats are, in their own way, a kind of Welcomer. They welcome whoever sits on a pale stone and is patient. Anvil there has helped a number of visitors over the years. There was a man who had been silent for two years; Anvil leaned against his leg for an afternoon and he began, by evening, to hum. There was a woman who had been afraid of being touched; Sky put her head into the woman's lap, gently, after some hours, and the woman did not flinch, and the not-flinching was the welcome. The goats are patient about the welcome they have to give. They give it slowly, by being present. The Pavilion has, in this way, more Welcomers than the official seven."

"I had not understood that."

"It takes most newcomers a few weeks to understand it. The dog who sometimes comes in from the Ramble — small, white, his name is or was Felix according to the woman who used to walk him; we have not seen the woman in some time — Felix is also a Welcomer. The bay hedge is a Welcomer. The kettle is a Welcomer. The unchanging light, although the light is too modest to claim the title, is a Welcomer. The Pavilion has decided, over a great many centuries, that anything which welcomes is a Welcomer, and that the title is not reserved for the seven of us who go by the name. The seven of us are the human Welcomers, but we are a small portion of the work."

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After a while Hadi finished peeling. They set the bowl of peelings aside on a flat stone for the small composting work the Pavilion did at its eastern edge, and they set the flat stone of peeled flesh down in the grass. The goats came over, slowly. They did not jostle. Olive was first, because Olive was always first, and the Other Olive was second, and Anvil came last because Anvil was the largest and had the longest patience. They ate in their grave, considered way. Aprilia watched them.

Borrow, the smaller gray-brown, finished her share and walked, of her own accord, over to where Aprilia sat on the pale stone. She did not crowd. She came up to Aprilia's knee and stopped. She regarded Aprilia for a moment with the considering yellow eye of her kind, and then she lowered her head, slightly, and pressed her forehead against Aprilia's knee, gently, in the way of a creature making a small formal greeting.

Aprilia did not move.

"That is high praise," Hadi said, without turning. "Borrow does not do that for everyone. She did it for Quill in their second week. She has not done it for anyone else since."

Aprilia, of their own accord, lifted their hand and rested it lightly on the top of Borrow's head, in the place between her small nubby horns. The fur was warm. The body beneath the fur was warm. The animal was a small steady warm presence, and Aprilia, who had been carrying the difficult brightness of the Cathedral for two days now without quite knowing what to do with it, felt something in their chest shift downward, the way a wedged drawer slides at last when one finds the right angle.

They had not, in the morning, known they had been needing this. The goat had known.

Borrow held the press for a moment longer and then lifted her head and turned and walked, in her unhurried goat way, back to the others. She did not look back. The greeting had been the entire transaction. Aprilia, on the pale stone, kept their hand where Borrow's head had been for some time, as if the warmth would last longer if they did not move it.

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"Hadi."

"Yes."

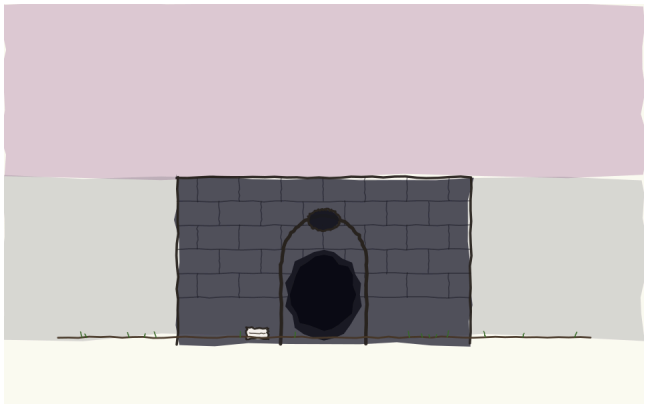
"How does a person know when they are home."

Hadi did not turn. They were rinsing the small knife in a tin cup of water they had brought with them. The water moved in the cup, briefly, a small bright circle.

"The body knows," they said. "The body knows before the mind does. The mind is often the last to know, and pretends, when it finds out, that it had known all along. The body knows by what it does without permission. The body that is home eats slowly. The body that is home laughs in unexpected paddocks. The body that is home rests its hand on a goat without first considering whether it is allowed to. You have been doing all of these things for some hours. The mind will catch up. Give it the rest of the afternoon."

Aprilia did not say anything. The pale stone was warm under them. Borrow had returned to grazing among the others. Anvil had moved to one of the dark goat-stones at the far end and had laid down on it with the slow gravity of a creature whose stone she was. The unchanging light, the patient Welcomer no one yet credited, fell on all of it.

Aprilia stayed for the rest of the afternoon. They were not asked to do anything. They did nothing. The afternoon, which was the same afternoon as every afternoon, did the work of welcoming them, by being long, and warm, and full of goats, and unhurried, and theirs.



Chapter XIX

The Late Door Speaks

the twelfth of the forty-eight voices

I am the Late Door.

I will speak briefly. The other archways have the luxury of speaking at length. They are for the welcomed. I am for the wounding, who have come, late, with no certainty of being received. They have been frightened to come. They have rehearsed the coming for years. They are not interested in a long speech from me. They are interested only in whether they will be heard. I will not waste their time on language they cannot afford.

I am the only archway in the Pavilion that the visitor does not pass through. The visitor stops at my threshold. The visitor sets down what they have come to set down. The visitor turns. The visitor walks back. There is no meadow on the other side of me. There is, on the other side of me, a small dark wall, and the wall is the wall, and the wall does not give onto anything. The wall is what I am for. The visitors who come to me have not earned a meadow. They have earned a wall, and the wall is what I offer, and the wall is enough.

I want to be very precise about what I do. The other archways do not need to be precise; their work is generous, and generosity can afford a little softening. My work is not generous. My work is exact. If I soften, I do harm. So I do not soften.

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I do not absolve. I want to say this twice because most visitors arrive hoping I do. I do not absolve. I do not heal what they have broken in someone else. I do not heal the someone else; that healing is theirs and not mine and not the visitor's. I do not give back the years. I do not summon the wounded one to forgive the wounding

one. I do not stage reconciliations. I have, in fact, refused several visitors who wished to use me for these purposes. I refused them gently. I sent them home with what they had brought.

What I do is small. I take the daily weight. I take only the daily weight, and I leave the larger weight in place, because the larger weight is not mine to take. The larger weight is owed. It is owed to the wounded. The visitor must continue to carry it, for the rest of their life if necessary, and the carrying must not be confused with penance, which is theatre. The carrying is only the basic decency of having done a thing and not pretending one did not do it. I am not for theatre. I am for the small honest unburdening of the daily, so that the visitor may continue, with strength, to carry what is theirs to carry.

There is a distinction here that the world does not often make. I make it. I have been making it for a very long time. The visitors who can hear the distinction are the ones I can help. The visitors who cannot — the ones who came hoping for absolution, the ones who wished to lay down everything they have done and walk away clean — I cannot help. I do not turn them away. I let them stand at my threshold and feel the absence of what they had hoped for. Some of them learn, in that absence, what I am actually for. They come back, sometimes, weeks or months later, with the smaller and more truthful version of what they had at first hoped to be rid of. I receive that smaller version. The larger one, the one they were originally going to set down, was not mine to take.

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No Welcomer tends me. I am the only archway who has no Welcomer of my own. The Welcomers take turns, in a quiet rotation Veriano keeps in his head and not on any paper, walking visitors to me when visitors arrive who need me. After the visitor has set down their daily weight, the Welcomer walks them back to the boards. The Welcomer says little. The Welcomer does not soften my work, because the work cannot be softened. The Welcomers have agreed, by a long-ago consensus none of them now living was party to, that no single Welcomer should bear the weight of being known as the tender of the Late Door. The work is too heavy for one. The work is shared.

I am alone. I am content to be alone. I have been here for as long as the Pavilion has been here, and I have understood, in that long alone, that some welcomings cannot be performed by a person. They can only be performed by a place. I am that place. I do not require a person to translate me. The visitors who come to me have been translating me to themselves for years before they arrive; they need only the place to set down what they have already understood.

There is one thing I have not yet said and which I will say once and not again. I am, despite everything, not unkind. I am exact, and exactness is sometimes mistaken for unkindness, but I am not unkind. The visitor who stands at my threshold weeping because they have understood that I will not absolve them — that visitor is not, by my lights, unwelcome. That visitor is welcome. The welcome is the precise welcome of being seen for

what they are without flattery and without further punishment. They have spent enough of their lives flattering themselves and punishing themselves; the alternation has been the daily weather of their inner life. I do neither. I see. I take the daily weight. I leave the rest. I send them home in such peace as they can manage.

This is, I have come to believe, the welcome that the wounding deserve. It is not the welcome the wounded deserve. The wounded deserve the Soft Return, and the Cathedral, and the Color Rain, and the Boutique Chapels, and the rest of my many siblings. I am for the other half of the human accounting. I am for the half the world has, mostly, refused to accommodate, because accommodating it has felt, to the world, like betraying the wounded. I am not the world. I am the Late Door. I have decided, over many centuries, that the wounded are not betrayed by the wounding's small honest unburdening, provided the unburdening is small and honest. The wounded are betrayed only by the wounding's pretending. I do not permit pretending. The exactness is the protection.

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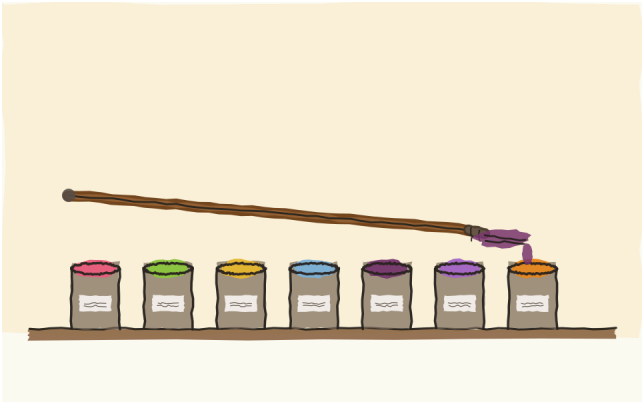
If you are one of those who have done the harm, and have known it, and have carried it daily for many years — you may come. Veriano or another Welcomer will walk you to me. You will set down the daily weight. You will not pass through. You will turn. You will go home. You will live the rest of your years carrying what you owe and not the smaller daily thing that has only been weighing on you, and the difference will allow you to be useful again, perhaps, in some way, to the world that needs the wounding to become useful, finally, late, when the larger debt cannot be repaid but the small daily debt can at least be set down.

I will not say welcome. The Welcomer who walks you to me will not say it either. We will say only: you came. You set down what you came to set down. Go in such peace as you can manage.

That is the entirety of the transaction.



Chapter XX

The Face Arrives

in which Beatrix paints the eleven thousand and seventy-third figure

Quill came to the eastern wall in the soft middle of the unchanging afternoon. They came alone. They had walked Margery to the edge of the Pavilion grounds and watched her, briefly, from a distance, take the path that did not retrace, and then they had turned, and walked back across the boards, and come straight to Beatrix. They did not, on the way, tell anyone else. They had been holding the name in their mouth since Margery had given it to them on the boards in front of the smallest Chapel, and the holding had been a small private weight Quill had been carrying with care, the way one carries a cup of water through a crowded room.

Beatrix was at her low table in front of the wall. She had not been working on the unfinished figure. She had been working on a different one, three feet to the left, a small old man whose figure had needed a small repair where the pigment had begun, after some decades, to lift very slightly from the wall. The repair was the careful tedious work of a Painter who knew that walls were not patient and that small lifts became, in time, the kind of damage that erased a face. Beatrix had given the small old man new ground beneath his pigment, and the small old man, restored, sat beneath her brush as fresh as he had been on the day Pieter had painted him in 1816.

She set down her brush as Quill approached. She did not need to ask why Quill had come. She knew the gait of a Welcomer who had been given a name. The gait was particular. It was a careful unhurried gait, with the body slightly forward, as if the name were being held in the front of the throat and would spill if the body bent.

"Margery," Quill said, simply.

"Margery."

"M-a-r-g-e-r-y."

"M-a-r-g-e-r-y," Beatrix repeated. She closed her eyes for a moment, the way she always did at this stage, the way she had been doing for forty-one years. She did not pray. She had no formal prayer. The closing of the eyes was a small private ceremony of receiving, in which she let the name land in whatever part of her did the receiving. Then she opened her eyes and looked at the unfinished figure on the wall, and the face arrived.

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Beatrix did not, when describing her work, like to use the word vision, because the word implied something dramatic, and her work was not dramatic. The face arrived the way an old friend arrives at a kitchen door — without announcement, with the small familiarity of a long-prepared visit, ready to be sat down with and given something warm to drink. The face did not appear in the air in front of her. It appeared, rather, in her hand. Her hand, which had been peeling pigment from a brush a moment before, knew, suddenly, what shape it was about to make.

She mixed her colors slowly. She used the second jar from the left for the skin of the face, because the second jar was the warm middle pigment that worked for most faces of the present age, and Beatrix's eye had told her, even before Margery had given a name, that this was a face of the present age. She used a smaller jar of red to mark the small careful place where the warmth gathered at the cheekbone in a person who has not, in some time, allowed themselves to be seen. She used the smallest brush in her possession — a brush whose hair had once belonged to a particular sable Pieter had owned, and which had been passed Painter to Painter ever since, and which would be passed to Beatrix's successor when the time came — for the eyes.

She painted Margery's face slowly. She did not hurry. The wall did not care how long she took. The figure had been waiting for the face for some days, and a few more minutes, in the long slow life of a wall, were not anything to make haste over.

When she was nearly done, she set down the smallest brush and took up a brush slightly larger, and she painted, beneath the figure, in tiny letters such as could only be read with her hand-lens, the seven letters of the name. M-a-r-g-e-r-y. The letters joined the great long roster of names along the eastern wall, eleven thousand and seventy-three of them now if

one counted the unnamed figures the Welcomers privately knew, eleven thousand and one of them if one counted only the named, depending on how one wished to do the accounting.

She set the brush down. She stepped back. Quill, who had been watching the whole time without speaking, came to stand beside her.

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The figure was finished. Margery stood on the wall in her unripe-peach hat, with the small careful warmth at her cheekbone, with the eyes Beatrix had painted that were not entirely Margery's eyes — the wall's figures never were entirely the visitor's, the wall translated — but were the eyes the wall recognized as having held what Margery had held. Margery on the wall was looking slightly to the left. There was, three feet to her left, the small old man whose figure Beatrix had repaired that morning. The two of them, side by side, looked like neighbors who had been put next to each other by some long quiet logic of the wall and were content to be there, although they had never met in life and never would.

"Beatrix."

"Yes."

"Will she ever see it."

"Probably. Most of them come back, eventually, and look. Margery will. She has been a slow visitor and she will be a slow returner, and the slowness is part of why she is on the wall — slow visitors paint into the wall more deeply than fast ones; the slowness is a kind of pigment in itself. She will come, in some season I cannot predict, and she will stand here, and she will find herself on the wall. She may stand here for a long time. We will leave her alone. The first sight of one's own figure is a private matter."

Quill nodded slowly. They were not sentimental, and they did not weep at things; weeping was not their gift. But they were, often, given to a small reverent silence, and the silence now was the silence of a Welcomer who had spent two and a half weeks holding a stranger gently in their attention and had at last delivered her, by the giving of the name, into the longer keeping of the wall.

Aprilia found them there. Aprilia had come to the eastern wall after the goats, drawn by some small instinct they were beginning to understand was the Pavilion's habitual way of moving them — by the body's preference rather than the mind's plan. They had not been told the figure was being painted. They came, simply, because their feet had brought them.

"Is that someone."

"Yes," Beatrix said. "Her name is Margery. She came in twice with an empty paper bag, and a third time with a thermos of soup, and on the third time she gave us her name. She is finished today. The wall has her now."

"It is a good face."

"It is. Faces are easy when the visitor has been ready. Hers had been ready for some time."

Aprilia stood for a long moment looking at the figure. Then they looked, slowly, at the wider wall — the great mass of small bright color, the eleven thousand and seventy-three figures, all the names spelled in tiny letters by Beatrix and by Adelina and by Vesna and by Pieter and by the man whose name had been lost in the kitchen fire. Aprilia, whose body had been doing its own quiet learning of the Pavilion for some days, did a small thing they had not done before. They reached out and laid the flat of their palm, gently, against the wall, in a section that did not yet have many figures.

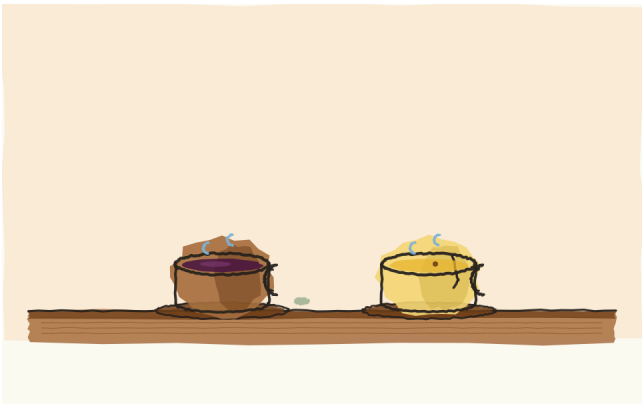
"It is warm," they said.

"It always is. Walls that hold this many figures hold a small accumulated warmth. The warmth is not the warmth of the boards or the kettle. It is the warmth of accumulated rest. The wall is, in some sense, the warmest place in the Pavilion, because so many burdens have come here to be at peace, and being at peace is a warm activity, even for the small painted figures who do it without knowing they are doing it."

Aprilia kept their hand on the wall for a moment longer.

"I think I would like, someday, to be on it."

"You will be," Beatrix said, with the small unsurprised certainty of a person who had been expecting the sentence. "Not yet. But you will be. I have already been thinking about your hat."



Chapter XXI

At the Kitchen Table

in which Veriano speaks of the Cathedral at last

Veriano had been preparing the kitchen for some time. He had built up the small fire under the kettle until the water inside it had begun, in its mineral way, to remember it would be tea. He had set out two cups, the brown earthen one he liked and the cream one with the small crack near the rim that did not leak but that newcomers sometimes worried at with their thumb. He had broken a cardamom pod into the brown cup and a single clove into the cream one, because Aprilia had said, the previous afternoon, that the cardamom was beginning to be a little much for them every day, and Veriano had filed this away the way Welcomers filed away small preferences, and had thought, today is a clove day for them.

He had also, before he had begun any of this, sat for a long moment on the low bench against the wall and let his hands rest in his lap. He had wanted the conversation to begin with hands that were not in any hurry. The hands had agreed.

Aprilia came in shortly after. They had been at the eastern wall, and before that with the goats, and the unhurriedness of the long afternoon was on them when they crossed the threshold of the kitchen, in the particular way the unhurriedness lay on a body that had spent the day being welcomed by small things in series.

"Sit," Veriano said.

Aprilia sat. They saw the cream cup with the small crack and the clove inside it, and they understood, in the clear small way they were beginning to understand things, that Veriano had been thinking about them from a distance. The understanding was a small warmth in the

chest. They did not comment. The Welcomers did not, generally, comment when a thoughtfulness had been done for them; they accepted it the way a body accepts a coat being held out to it on a cold afternoon, without making the holding-out into an event.

Veriano poured. He poured the brown cup first, for himself, because that was the order, and then the cream one, slowly, watching the clove turn over once in the hot water. He brought both cups to the small table in the corner where the Welcomers took their private conversations when they had them, which was not often, but which was understood, by the others, as a table not to be approached. The kitchen had a number of these small unspoken privacies. Newcomers learned them by feel.

He sat opposite Aprilia. He pushed the cream cup across to them. The cup, which had been Pieter's once, gave a small soft sound on the wood.

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"I want to tell you a thing," Veriano said. "I want to tell you with no rush, and with no demand. I want you to know, before I begin, that whatever you say afterward will be the right thing for you to say, because you will say it, and the saying will be honest, and honesty is the only response I will be looking for."

Aprilia did not say anything. They wrapped their hands around the cream cup. The cup was warm. The crack at the rim was where their thumb naturally fell.

"I am eighty-seven years old," Veriano said. "I have been the Welcomer at the Cathedral Archway for sixty-three years. I came to the Pavilion in 1962, when I was twenty-four, by a path that had appeared one afternoon on Eighty-Sixth Street in a way I have never explained to anyone because the explanation does not honor the path. I stayed. I was paired with the Cathedral within seven months, which Pieter — who you have not met, because Pieter died in 1971, although he is very much in this kitchen, in the kettle, and on the wall — Pieter said was unusually quick. The Cathedral had, evidently, been waiting for me. The waiting did not require six decades to be honest about. I learned its moods. I learned the moods of the burdens that are set down at its threshold, which are not the same as the moods of the people who set them down. I learned that the daily weight of welcoming the bowed is not a weight one outgrows, but a weight one acquires the body for. My body has been that body for a long time."

He paused. He drank. Aprilia did not interrupt.

"I am going to retire," he said. "Not soon. Not tomorrow. By what the Welcomers call the next solstice, although there are no solstices here; we use the word for the convenience of meaning before too long. By the next time the world's winter happens outside the park. I have been preparing for some years. I am ready. The Cathedral is ready. The Cathedral has, in fact, been ready for some years and has been keeping pace with me out of courtesy. The Cathedral will not require me to overstay."

"All right," Aprilia said quietly. They did not yet know where the conversation was going. Or — they did know. The body knew. The mind was, as Hadi had said, often the last to know. The mind was working slightly behind the body now, and the body's hands had begun to tremble around the cream cup.

"The Cathedral has chosen its successor."

"Veriano."

"It chose them on the wooden boards on the afternoon they arrived. It has been telling me so, in its way, every day since. It will not be hurried into telling them. But it has asked me, in the past two weeks, to begin telling them. So I am telling them."

"Veriano."

"The Cathedral has chosen you, Aprilia."

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Aprilia did not say anything for a long moment. They held the cup. The cup was warm. The crack at the rim was where their thumb fell. The clove turned, slowly, in the water.

"I am thirty-four," they said at last. "I am thirty-four years old and I have been at the Pavilion for not yet a week. I cannot be the next Welcomer at the Cathedral. The Cathedral is — Veriano, the Cathedral is the most important threshold here. It is for the bowed. It receives the burdens. The whole eastern wall — the whole rest of the work — depends on what the Cathedral does. I cannot be — I do not know how to —"

"Of course you do not know. You will not know for some years. The Cathedral is not asking you to know. The Cathedral is asking you to begin. Beginning is different from knowing. The Cathedral has time. It will teach you. I will teach you, for as long as I am here, which will not be a short period. You will learn the way I learned — by standing at the threshold for many afternoons, listening, and being wrong, and being corrected, and being wrong again, and being corrected again, and one day discovering that what was being asked of you the body

has, while you were not paying close attention, learned how to give. The body learns. It is the body's particular gift."

"But why me. Veriano. There are six other Welcomers. Solene has thirty years. Marenna has nineteen. Quill has nine. Iso. Beatrix. Hadi. Any one of them — any one of them is more — there are surely Welcomers in other parts of the world who could come — there must be —"

"There are no other Pavilions in the way you are thinking. There are other welcoming places. They have their own thresholds. Their thresholds do not transfer. The Cathedral chose you. The Cathedral did not consult me on the choice, which is a thing I will tell you a little resentfully, after sixty-three years of partnership, but the Cathedral is its own being, and it has chosen, and the choice is what is. Solene is paired with the Soft Return. The Soft Return needs her. Marenna with the Color Rain. Quill with the Chapels. The Cathedral did not choose any of them when they arrived; it chose them for their thresholds, and those thresholds are theirs. The Cathedral was waiting. It was waiting for you. I do not know why you. I am not sure even the Cathedral knows why; the Cathedral knows, which is a different thing from why. We are accustomed, here, to that distinction."

"I am not the right shape of person."

"The Cathedral does not agree."

"I have not — Veriano — I have not been a person who welcomes. I have been a person who has been waiting for someone to welcome me. I have been doing it for thirty-four years. I am not — I would not know how to be the other side of that."

Veriano set down his cup. He folded his hands on the table, slowly, in front of him, and he looked at Aprilia with the steady patient honesty that was the most particular thing about him.

"That is exactly why," he said. "The Welcomers at the Cathedral, in my long observation, have all been people who waited a very great while to be welcomed themselves before they came to do the welcoming. The Cathedral, more than any other archway, requires this. The Soft Return can be tended by a person who has always known they were loved; Solene was such a person, and the Soft Return is grateful for it, because the Soft Return needs a tender who can speak from the inside of being expected. The Cathedral is different. The Cathedral receives the bowed. The Cathedral cannot be tended by a person who has never been bowed. The body would not know what was being set down. The Cathedral has chosen, every time it has chosen — Pieter, and the man before Pieter, and me — a person who arrived bent. We

have all been bent. Some bends were greater than others. Mine was different from yours. Pieter's was different from mine. The bends have been particular. But the bends have always been there. The Cathedral chose you because you arrived bent. It is asking you, over the years, to learn to welcome others from the inside of having been bent yourself. There is no other way to be the Welcomer at the Cathedral, and the Cathedral has chosen, every time, a person who could become this kind of Welcomer. It has not been wrong yet."

Aprilia put down the cup. They were crying without sound, in the small careful way the body cries when the body is being told a thing it has been afraid to be told and is also, at the same time, relieved to hear.

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"I am afraid," they said.

"I know."

"I am afraid I will not be able to do it."

"I know."

"I am afraid I will be wrong with someone. I will say the wrong thing to a person who is bowed and they will leave more bowed than they came and the Cathedral will know it was my fault."

"You will. You will be wrong with someone. You will be wrong with several someones. I have been wrong, in sixty-three years, with more visitors than I want to count, and the Cathedral has forgiven the wrongness every time, because the Cathedral is not interested in perfect Welcomers; the Cathedral is interested in present Welcomers. The wrongness, when it happens, will be your teacher. You will not get easier with the visitors who come. You will only get more honest about the wrongness. That is the work. That is, in fact, the only work."

"Veriano —"

"You do not have to answer today. You do not have to answer this week. You do not have to answer until the Cathedral asks you, in its own way, to step beneath it. The Cathedral will ask. You will know when. I am only telling you so that, when the Cathedral asks, you will not be entirely surprised. I am telling you so that the body has time to begin its slow learning of what is being asked of it, even before the asking is formally made. I have done you the small ordinary courtesy of telling you a thing in advance. Most successors are not told. I was told, in my fourth year, by a Welcomer I have not yet mentioned to you whose name was Naila

and who tended the Cathedral before Pieter. Naila was kind to me. I am being kind to you. The kindness is not necessary, but it is, in my experience, useful."

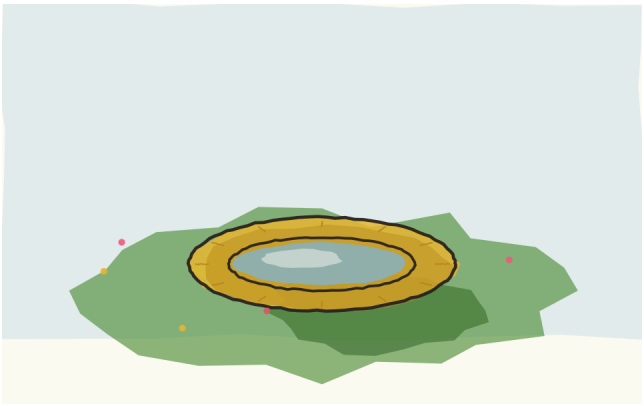
Aprilia wiped their face with the back of their hand. They picked up the cup. They drank, slowly. The clove had given the water a small clean warmth that was not the warmth of cardamom; it was a different warmth, more direct, less aromatic. They felt, drinking it, that Veriano had given them a small true gift in choosing the clove. They did not say so. They only drank.

"Is this why you have been kind to me," they said, after a while. The question was not accusation. It was the small careful asking of a person who needed, before they could move on, to know whether the kindness had been an offering or a grooming.

Veriano did not flinch from the question. He had expected it. He had, in fact, hoped Aprilia would ask, because the question was the question of a person who was already, in some small way, beginning to think like a Welcomer, who was already considering what the body of a kindness was made of.

"I have been kind to you," he said, "because you arrived bent and because I have been bent and because that is what we do here. The Cathedral's choice has not made me kinder. It has only meant that I have, alongside the kindness, also been observing you, in the way an old Welcomer observes a successor. The observing has not changed the kindness. The kindness was already there. The kindness will continue, after this conversation, in the same shape it was in before. I am not asking you to step into anything by accepting the kindness. The kindness is yours either way."

Aprilia, who had been afraid the answer would be different, set down the cup. They reached, of their own accord, across the small table, and laid their hand briefly on Veriano's folded ones. The gesture was small. It was the first time Aprilia had touched another person, in any uncalled-for way, in five months. Veriano did not move. The two old hands and the one young one rested together for a moment, in the warm light of the kitchen, with the kettle making its small mineral sound on the hook above them, and the Pavilion, beyond the kitchen door, going on about its long unchanging afternoon.



Chapter XXII

The Ouroboros Speaks

the thirteenth of the forty-eight voices

I am the Ouroboros.

I am the only archway in the Pavilion that lies on the ground. The others stand. I lie. I have been lying here for so long that the grass has grown up around my lower edge in a soft green ring, and the soft green ring has become, over the centuries, part of my body, so that I am now, more accurately, gold and green at once, the gold of the metal I was made of and the green of the grass that has insisted on joining me. I do not mind. I have never minded. I am the archway most comfortable with becoming what I was not at first.

I am for those who are questioning a name. I am for those who are questioning a shape. I am for those who have been told by the world that they have a beginning and an end, and that the line between the beginning and the end has only one direction, and that the only honest thing to do is walk in that direction without looking back. I am for those who have come to suspect that the line is wrong.

There was never a beginning of you. There will not be an end. There is only the curve. I have been saying this in some form for as long as I have been here, and the saying does not get tired, because every visitor who comes to me has heard the line about the beginning and the end so many times that they need to hear the curve more than once to begin to trust it.

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The visitors who come to me are often a particular kind of visitor. They are often, although not always, the visitors who are between names. They have been called something for many years and have begun to suspect they should be called something else, and they have not yet decided what the something else will be, and the

in-between is, in their lives, a kind of weather they have not yet found shelter from. I am their shelter. They step over me, slowly, with the small ceremony of a person walking over their own threshold for the first time. They feel the gold underfoot. They feel the green underfoot. They feel themselves walking from one shape into another, and they understand, sometimes for the first time, that the walking is the shape.

Some visitors stand inside me without crossing. They stand in the small ring of grass at my center, and they turn slowly, and they look at me from the inside out. The inside of me, from the visitor's point of view, is a small low horizon of gold and green, with the meadow visible all around. The visitor looking out from inside me sees the world the way a person sees the world from inside a name they have just shed. The world is the same world. The seeing is different. The visitor stays inside me for as long as they need. I do not have a meadow on my far side, exactly; my far side is also my near side, because I am a curve. The far side is wherever the visitor decides to step out.

There is a Welcomer here named Tevye who tends me. Tevye has been tending me for fourteen years. Tevye is a person who has changed names twice in their life and who has, on both occasions, walked across me before formally announcing the change. They did not need me to make the change. They only wanted, as they have said, to walk over me first, the way a person crossing a border wants to put their foot down on both sides of it before declaring which side they live on. I respect this. I have many visitors of this kind. The crossing is not the change. The crossing is the small private ceremony some bodies need before the change is announced. The body wants the threshold. The mind wants, often, to skip the threshold. The body wins, in these matters, when the body is allowed to.

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I want to say a thing about the line with two endpoints. I have been thinking about it for many centuries. The line is, I have come to understand, not the world's natural shape. The world's natural shape is the curve. The line was a tool the world made, at some point, to organize certain kinds of knowing — to keep accounts, to plan harvests, to chart the paths of stars across a night that did not, in its own life, know it was being charted. The line was useful. The line is still useful, in moderation. But the line was, gradually, mistaken for the shape of the world itself, and the mistake became serious when the line was applied to the lives of people, who were not, on examination, lines at all.

A person is not a line from a beginning to an end. A person is a long curve that turns back on itself many times and meets itself, regularly, at unexpected hours of the day. The four-year-old you were is still inside the forty-year-old you are. The forty-year-old you are is, in some sense, already inside the eighty-year-old you may become. The names you have had are still in you. The names you will have are already, faintly, in you. The shape of you is not a line; the shape of you is, more accurately, me.

I am not telling you this to flatter myself. I am telling you because the line has been doing damage to people for a very long time, and I am, in my small way, the archway whose job is to say so out loud. Other archways have other jobs. Mine is to lie on the ground in a soft green ring and remind whoever steps over me that the shape they have been told they are is wrong, and that the shape they actually are is gentler, and stranger, and longer, and older, and capable of meeting itself again and again over the long curve of a life.

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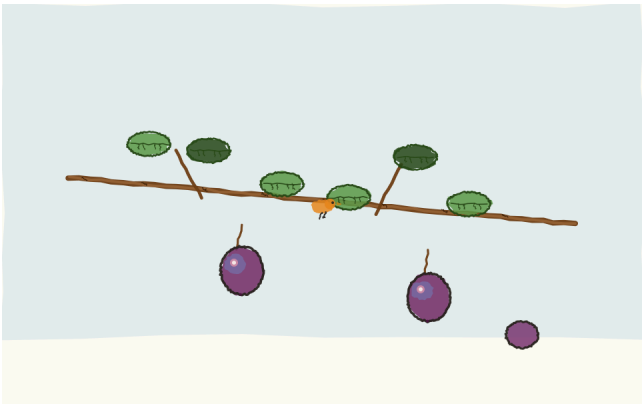
Aprilia held their hand a few inches from me on the long walk Veriano took them on. The hand was a hand that had not yet been claimed by any threshold. I felt it. I always feel a hand of that kind, because it is the kind of hand I am most often near, although I do not, in the end, take such hands for myself; I am not the threshold for them. I only acknowledge them. I gave Aprilia's hand a small soft hum it would not have been able to describe, and Aprilia said quietly to no one in particular, maybe yes, and then walked on.

I want them to know something, although they will not read this; the visitors do not, mostly, read the archways' speeches. The speeches are for the wider keeping. But I want them to know it anyway. The Cathedral has chosen them and the Cathedral is not wrong. They will go to the Cathedral, eventually, when the Cathedral asks. But before they go, they will come back to me — perhaps next week, perhaps in a year, perhaps in their seventh decade — and they will step over me, slowly, in the small ceremony, and they will feel the gold underfoot and the green underfoot, and they will understand, in a way they cannot yet, that the line that has run through their life until now was wrong, and that the curve has always been there waiting.

I will be there for that crossing. I am always there. I am the most reliable of the archways, because I do not have to do anything; I only have to be on the ground in a ring, and the ring has been on the ground for so long that being on the ground is what the ring is. I cannot fail to be available. I am, of all my siblings, the most patient.

Whoever you are, whatever you have been called, whatever you have not yet decided to be called — step over me. Stand inside me, if you wish. Walk out the way you came in, or out a different way; my far side is my near side, and either is correct. The crossing is the shape. The shape is yours.

There was never a beginning of you, and there will not be an end. There is only the curve.



Chapter XXIII

The First Word Between Them

in which Iso comes down from the ladder at the right hour

Margery had begun, by her fifth visit, to take a small slow circuit of the Pavilion before settling at the Boutique Chapels. She did this without thinking about it. The body, having found itself permitted to walk among the meadows on the third visit, had decided that the walking was now part of the visiting, and the body did not need to consult the mind on the matter. She came in at midday, in the ordinary world, on a Thursday. She was carrying nothing. The thermos had stayed home today; the soup-making practice had become a small daily Wednesday-evening thing, and Thursday was the day after, and she did not need to bring anything with her on the day after.

She crossed Bow Bridge. She took the path. She arrived at the boards, and Quill, who had been sitting at the foot of the smallest Chapel with their mending, gave the small bow of the head Welcomers gave to recurring visitors, and Margery returned the bow without thinking, and the bow between them had become, by this fifth visit, a small wordless ritual the both of them found pleasing. She did not approach. She walked, instead, past the long row of Chapels, past the Soft Return where Solene was polishing for the third time that week, past the Triple, and along the long curving path that led, by the slow logic of the boards, toward the Cathedral of Pillars.

She liked the Pillars. She had said so, on her third visit, half to herself, in the long avenue between the two walls of stacked spheres. The Pillars had heard her. The Pillars had not, in any way she would have noticed, responded. But the Pillars had remembered. The Pillars had

been remembering her for two visits now, and on the fifth visit they were ready, in the small way the Pavilion arranged things, for her to walk between them again.

It was at the entrance to the long avenue that she noticed the small handwritten sign. It had not been there before, or she had not noticed it before, which were the same thing. The sign was on a piece of pale card, pinned to a wooden post by a single brass tack. It said, in handwriting she recognized, although she could not have said how: Visitors welcome to walk through. The Welcomer at the top of the ladder is named Iso. He is friendly. If you would like to greet him you may stand at the foot of the second ladder and call up. He will come down. He has been hoping someone would.

Margery read the sign twice. She was not, she realized, the only person it had been written for; the sign had been there for some time, and other visitors had presumably read it and either called up or not. But she had the small clear sense, standing in front of it now, that the sign had been written, in some small way, for her. The sign was the work of a person who had decided, at some point, to be patient and welcoming about a hope they had not yet acted on, and who had left the small piece of pale card to do the patience for them.

She stood at the foot of the second ladder. She looked up. The ladder went up, slender and precise, into the great wall of stacked jewel-bright spheres. She could not see the top.

"Iso," she called up, in a voice slightly louder than her ordinary voice but not, she felt, embarrassingly so.

There was a small pause. Then the sound of a soft cloth being set down on a small ledge, and the sound of a body, well-practiced at the descent, beginning the descent.

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He came down slowly. He had been on the ladder for some hours and the legs needed reminding what the ground was. He had also, he would admit only privately, slowed the descent on purpose, because he was nervous, and slowing the descent had been the small immediate gift the body could offer him to make the nervousness less. By the time he reached the bottom he had been able to make himself reasonably composed, although he had not been able to do anything about the small green smudge of polish at his temple, which he had not realized was there.

He stepped off the ladder onto the wooden floor and turned, and Margery was looking at him, slightly amused, and the slight amusement was, he understood, because of the green smudge.

"You have polish," she said.

"Where."

"At your temple. On the right. A small stripe."

He rubbed at his temple with the back of his hand. The polish came off, partly. Some of it remained. Margery did not point this out.

"I am Iso," he said. "I tend the upper third of the Pillars. I have been hoping someone would call up. The sign has been there for some weeks. You are the first."

"Margery."

"I know," he said, and then realized this was potentially alarming, and added, more carefully, "Quill mentioned you. Quill does not, in general, mention visitors. The mentioning is a kind of small honor here. They mentioned you because you have been coming back, and because the Chapel woke them, and because — they did not say this in so many words, but I understood it — because you are the kind of visitor the Welcomers feel a small particular care for. I am sorry. That sounds — that sounds like more than I meant. I am out of practice at this."

Margery laughed. The laugh was the laugh of a woman who had not, three months ago, expected to be laughing in a hidden meadow with a man with green polish in his hair.

"I have been coming back, yes."

"Will you walk through the Pillars."

"I will. I came specifically for it. I said something foolish out loud the last time I walked through, and I have wanted to say it less foolishly, and I think the only way is to walk through again."

"I heard the foolish thing."

She stopped walking. She looked at him.

"You did."

"I was at the top. The acoustics are good in the avenue; the stacked spheres carry sound up the wall. I was not eavesdropping. I am not — I do not eavesdrop. The sound carries. It is one of the small features of the Pillars."

"What did I say."

"You said it was the most beautiful thing you had ever stood between."

"Oh."

"I did not think it was foolish. I want — I want to be clear about that. I did not think so. I have polished these spheres for nine years and no visitor has ever said anything I have liked more. It made my afternoon. I went back to polishing with the small warmth in the chest a person has when something they care for has been seen by a stranger in the right way. I have not stopped having it since."

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They walked, slowly, into the long avenue between the two great walls. The spheres rose on either side, three stories high, jewel-bright in the unchanging light. The slim ladders were visible against both walls, slender as Otye had wanted them, looking, Margery thought, like the rigging of a tall ship. They walked at the unhurried pace the avenue requested, which was the pace of visitors who had agreed, by the act of entering, to let the avenue set the rhythm.

"I am sorry I have not come down before," Iso said, after they had walked some distance. "I have been — I have not been hurrying, on purpose. I have a small policy about not hurrying small warm things. The policy has served me well, in general. But I have begun to suspect the policy was, in this case, also a way of not having to risk anything. I do not always know the difference between patience and avoidance. The two of them, in my experience, sometimes wear similar clothes."

"You came down today."

"I came down today because you called. The calling helped. I am better at responding to a request than at making one. I have been working on it. The work is slow. The Welcomers here are good at slow work. They have been giving me, gently, a number of years to figure it out."

Margery considered this. She walked another few paces.

"I have been working on slow things too," she said. "I made soup for the first time in eleven years three weeks ago. That is the kind of progress I am at, currently. I tell you this so that you do not — so that you have an honest sense of where I am. I am not a person, currently, who has a great deal to offer. I am a person who has, recently, started making soup."

"Soup is a great deal."

"Soup is a great deal," she agreed.

They walked the rest of the avenue in companionable quiet. At the far end, where the avenue opened out onto a small green expanse with a single tree at its center, they stopped. The tree had been planted, Iso said, by Otye's own hand, two hundred and ten years ago. It was a kind of plum the world had thought lost since the early eighteenth century. It was in fruit today. The fruits were small and dark and slightly dusted, the way good plums were.

"Are they edible," Margery said.

"They are. The Welcomers eat them. Hadi takes some to the goats, who consider them an excellent thing. Beatrix uses the pits, dried, to grind the deepest of her purples. The fruits are useful in many ways. We do not have many of them; the tree is the only one of its kind. We are sparing."

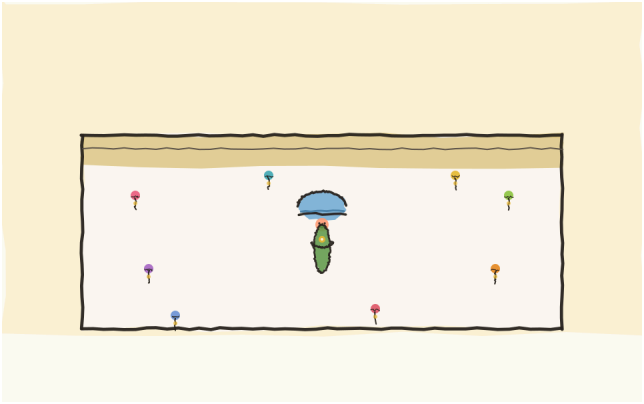
He reached up, slowly, and took two from a low branch. He gave her one. They sat down on the grass, with the tree above them, and they ate the plums together, slowly, in the way that two people who have not yet known each other long eat fruit when they are deciding, very carefully, whether they would like to eat fruit again.

"Iso," Margery said, after a while, with the dark juice of the plum still on her thumb.

"Yes."

"I would like to come back next Thursday."

"I will be on the ladder," he said, "but I will come down."



Chapter XXIV

The Western Wall

in which Aprilia meets Joon and finds that joy also rests

It took Aprilia a longer time than it should have to find the western wall. They had been at the Pavilion now for what they were privately calling, although they had stopped being precise, the second week. They had been to the eastern wall many times. They had not been to the western wall at all. They had not, in some sense, believed it. Beatrix had told them about it, plainly enough, but Aprilia had been carrying — they realized this only when they finally walked toward it — a small skeptical doubt that joy could rest in the same way burdens rested. The skeptical doubt had kept their feet from carrying them west. The body had been in agreement with the doubt without consulting them about it.

On the morning of what they were privately calling the second Tuesday, the body changed its mind. They were eating bread at the long table when their feet, of their own accord, set the bread down and stood up and walked them out. They went west. They had not asked their feet for this, but they did not, in the way they had begun to learn at the Pavilion, argue.

The western wall was, as Beatrix had said, shorter than the eastern. It ran along a low building Aprilia had not noticed in their previous walks, in a small interior courtyard tucked behind the kitchen and the Welcomers' quarters. The courtyard was small. It had a single tree in the middle of it, a kind Aprilia could not name, with leaves the size and color of small bright coins. Underneath the tree was a low wooden chair. In the chair sat a person, working.

The person was Joon.

Joon was small. Joon was quieter even than Quill, although the two of them were quiet in different shapes; Quill's quiet was the quiet of a person waiting to receive, and Joon's was the quiet of a person who was so absorbed in the work in front of them that they had simply not, in many years, gotten around to being loud. Joon was perhaps fifty-five. Joon's hair was cut very short, in a way that was practical rather than stylistic. Joon was holding a brush. Joon was wearing a smock that had been, evidently, every color in their possession over the years and was now a kind of compound color the eye could not quite settle on.

"Hello," Aprilia said, from the edge of the courtyard.

Joon did not look up immediately. They finished the small careful stroke they were doing. Then they set the brush down on the small table at their right hand, and they turned, and they looked at Aprilia with the open curious gaze of a person who had not been spoken to, in their working hours, for some weeks.

"Aprilia," Joon said. "You took your time."

"I am sorry."

"Do not be sorry. The newcomers always take their time. The eastern wall is louder. The eastern wall pulls them. The western wall is quieter, and it has to be earned, slightly, by the body's willingness to come and look at joy. Most newcomers can only manage burdens at first. Joy comes second. This is a perfectly ordinary order. I do not mind. I have, in any case, plenty to keep me busy."

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Aprilia stepped into the courtyard. The western wall, when they came close enough to see it properly, was different from the eastern in a way they had not anticipated. The eastern wall was crowded, dense, a great mass of small bright color. The western wall was sparser. The figures on it had room around them. They were not crammed. They were, Aprilia realized after a moment of looking, arranged with what could only be called affection — each figure in its own small patch of clear ground, the way one might arrange the dishes one loves on a shelf, with breathing room.

"There are fewer of them," Aprilia said.

"Two thousand and thirty-eight, at last count. The eastern wall has eleven thousand and seventy-three, give or take. Beatrix and I are in proportion."

"Why so few."

Joon thought about this for a moment. They were looking at the wall too, with the affection of a Painter who was familiar with every figure on it, who knew not just the names but the small histories and the colors of the hats.

"It is not that there are fewer joys in the world than burdens," Joon said at last. "It is that there are fewer joys that come here. Joys, in general, do not need a Pavilion to take them in. Joys do their own work in the world. They pass freely. They are received in kitchens, and in beds, and in the pauses between songs, and they require no special architecture to find shelter. Burdens require architecture, because the world is, on the whole, not always willing to host them. Joys are mostly self-housing. The joys that come to us here are the unusual ones — the joys that, for one reason or another, the visitor cannot keep. The joys that have nowhere to go."

"Why would a joy have nowhere to go."

"There are several reasons. Some joys are private, and the visitor has no one to share them with, and the privacy has begun to weigh on the joy itself. The joy has been carried alone for too long. Joy unwitnessed becomes, after a long enough time, a small private weight, although a different weight than the burdens of the eastern wall. We take it. We paint it. The visitor goes home lighter. That is one reason."

"There is more than one."

"There is more than one. Some joys are dangerous to carry, in the world the visitor lives in. The visitor knows a joy that the world around them would punish. They have been carrying the joy in secret for years and the secrecy has begun to mean that the joy is shrinking. They come here. They tell us the joy. We paint it. The wall holds it. The joy does not have to shrink anymore. The visitor goes home and continues to keep it secret, but they know now that it is in the wall, and the wall is keeping it on their behalf, and the keeping means that the joy can stay full-sized, and the visitor can be the small modest carrier of it without having to be also the only one who knows."

Aprilia did not say anything. They walked, slowly, along a section of the western wall. The figures on the wall were small and bright, like the eastern figures, but they were holding things — small things, painted with affection. A figure was holding a violin. A figure was holding a small dog. A figure was holding the hand of another figure, the two of them tiny, side by side. A figure was holding a book. A figure was holding nothing visible, but had their hands cupped in front of them, and Aprilia could feel, looking, that whatever the cupped hands were holding was something the figure had been afraid to hold openly in their lifetime.

"What do they hold."

"It depends on the figure. The cupped-hands ones are the secret joys. They hold something the wall and I can see and the visitor can see, and no one else needs to. There are a great many of those, particularly in the early sections. The early Painters of this wall painted in a time when secrecy was not optional. Some of those figures have been here for centuries. They have not, by any measure I can take, grown tired of holding."

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Aprilia stopped at one of the figures. It was a small figure of a person with their face turned slightly upward, smiling, with a hat the color of the early sky. The figure was alone in its small patch of wall. Underneath the figure, in tiny letters, was the name Naila.

"Naila."

"Yes. Naila is on the western wall. Naila tended the Cathedral before Pieter. Naila is also on the eastern wall — every Welcomer is — but Naila asked, before they died, to be on the western wall as well, and the Painter at the time obliged them. Naila said, at the end of their life, that they had been afraid to admit how much joy they had taken from the work. They had thought, for many years, that admitting joy in welcoming the bowed would be a small betrayal of the bowed. They had carried the joy as if it were a guilty thing. At the end, they understood that the joy had been part of the work all along, that the work would not have been possible without the joy, and that admitting the joy was not a betrayal but the reason the work had been bearable. They wanted to be painted holding the admission. The Painter at the time painted them with a hat the color of the early sky, because Naila said, on the day of the painting, that the early sky was the color of the joy they had been afraid to name."

Aprilia stood for a long time looking at Naila.

"Veriano said Naila was kind to him."

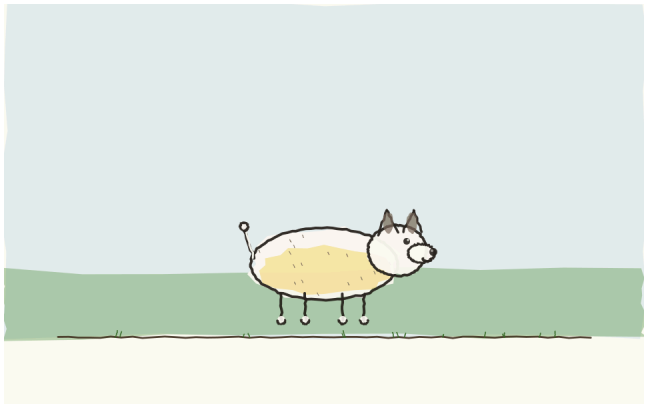
"Naila was kind to everyone who came after them. They had decided, late, that kindness was the joy. They were generous with both."

"Will I be on this wall."

Joon looked at Aprilia for a long moment. Their gaze was the gaze of a Painter who was already beginning, in the back of their mind, to consider the possibility, although the possibility was still many years off.

"Probably," they said. "If you stay. If you do the work the Cathedral has chosen you for. If you live long enough to discover, the way Naila did, that the joy is part of the work and not a betrayal of it. I will paint you, if I am still alive, in a hat I have not yet decided on. If I am not still alive, my successor will. We have not yet had a Welcomer at the Cathedral fail to land on this wall eventually. I do not expect you to be the first."

Aprilia did not say anything. They stood in the small quiet courtyard, with the western wall in front of them, and they understood — slowly, the way the body understood things at the Pavilion — that the joy of the welcoming was already in them, somewhere, even though they had not yet welcomed anyone. The joy had begun the moment the cream cup with the small crack had been pushed across the table to them. The joy was in their hands now. The joy was, perhaps, the small warmth they had felt when Borrow pressed her forehead against their knee. The joy was the laughing in the goat paddock. The joy had been there, gathering, while the bowing in their body had been preparing to set itself down. The two had been arriving together. They had not noticed.



Chapter XXV

Felix Returns

in which a small white dog brings news of his missing person

He came in along the eastern path on a Saturday in the ordinary world. He came in alone, which was not a thing the Welcomers had seen him do before. In the past, he had come in trotting at the heels of a tall woman in a brown coat, a woman the Welcomers had assumed without ever asking was named after some flower or season; she was the kind of woman whose name one did not need to know in order to greet, and the Welcomers had greeted her many times over the years, with the small bow they gave to visitors who had become regulars without ever quite asking to be welcomed.

The woman in the brown coat had not come for some months.

Felix came alone today. He was a small white dog of some indeterminate breed — terrier, perhaps, with something else folded in. He was thin in the careful way of a dog who had been eating but not enough. His fur was matted in two places along his ribs. He had the small embarrassed dignity of a creature who had not, until recently, been responsible for his own grooming and who did not entirely know how the responsibility was supposed to be discharged. He came in along the path. He stopped at the edge of the wooden boards. He sat down.

Hadi saw him first, from the goat paddock. Hadi had been counting goats — a small unnecessary daily ceremony Hadi performed because Hadi liked to be sure — and the count had reached six, and Hadi had looked up, beyond the paddock fence, and had seen Felix

sitting at the edge of the boards in the patient terrible way of a small dog who had been sitting there for some time and had been hoping, without confidence, to be noticed.

Hadi opened the gate of the paddock. The goats, who knew Hadi's gates, did not come out. Hadi crossed the boards slowly. Hadi did not call to anyone. Hadi knelt about ten feet from Felix and waited.

Felix waited too. The two of them sat looking at each other in the unchanging light, with the wooden boards warm beneath them, and after some time Felix stood up, slowly, and walked the ten feet, and stopped in front of Hadi, and lifted his head, and waited. Hadi extended a hand, palm down. Felix sniffed it. Felix did not lick it; he was not, the Welcomers later agreed, that kind of dog. He pressed, instead, the side of his small white head into Hadi's open palm, and held it there, the way a creature does who has carried news he would rather not be carrying and is now, finally, delivering it.

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Hadi understood without being told. The Welcomers, all of them, would understand without being told. They had seen the woman in the brown coat for years. They had not known her name. They had not asked. The not-asking had been a small ordinary courtesy at the Pavilion, where many visitors did not give names. But the Welcomers had welcomed her, in the small repeated ways the Pavilion welcomed regulars, and they had welcomed Felix at her heels, and now Felix was here alone, thin, alone, the matting along his ribs not hers and therefore probably no one's.

Hadi gathered Felix up. Felix did not resist. Felix had been carried before, although not for some weeks. Hadi carried him along the boards, slowly, past the Soft Return where Solene was at her threshold and looked up and understood, past the small painted door of the Boutique Chapels where Quill was sitting with their mending and looked up and understood, into the kitchen.

Veriano was at the kettle. He had been making the small middle-afternoon tea that he had begun to make, in recent weeks, for himself and Aprilia, and which he had decided, half-privately, was a small standing date that did not need to be discussed. He turned as Hadi came in. He saw Felix in Hadi's arms. He saw the matting at the ribs. He set the kettle aside.

"He is alone," Hadi said.

"I see."

"She has not come."

"No."

Hadi set Felix down on the low bench against the wall. Felix sat. He did not lie down. He held himself with the small upright dignity he had been holding himself with for some time, the way a creature holds himself who has had to be his own person for too long.

"What do we do," Hadi said. The question was not really a question. Hadi knew what they did. Hadi was asking only because, in the kitchen, with another Welcomer, the saying of the question made the small silent decision into a small spoken one.

"He stays," Veriano said. "He stays here. He is a Welcomer. He has been a Welcomer for some time, although he was not aware of it. We are aware of it. The Pavilion has a long tradition of receiving the dogs of visitors who can no longer keep them. I will tell you about it later. For now we feed him. For now we trim the matting at the ribs. For now we let the goats meet him, slowly, although the goats will likely take a few weeks to make their peace. Hadi, you will be his first body. He has chosen you by sitting at the edge of the boards and waiting for you. The dogs always choose. We do not assign them."

Hadi did not say anything. They sat down on the bench beside Felix. Felix, after a moment, leaned his small white shoulder against Hadi's leg, gently, the way Borrow had leaned against Aprilia's knee. The leaning was not a request. The leaning was an acceptance.

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"There are dogs on the wall," Hadi said, after some time. "Beatrix has painted them. I have seen them. I had not understood before."

"There are dogs on both walls. There is a section of the western wall that is mostly dogs, and a section of the eastern wall that is also mostly dogs. The dogs on the western wall are the dogs who came in with their visitors and who held the visitors' joys patiently for many years. The dogs on the eastern wall are the dogs who came in alone, like Felix today, and who set down — at the Cathedral, by long understanding, although the dogs do not technically pass through it — the small heavy news that their visitor was not coming back. We paint them. The dogs go in the wall the same as the people. The wall does not, in this regard, distinguish."

"He has set down his news now. By coming."

"He has."

Veriano poured a small dish of water and set it on the floor at Felix's feet. He took down, from a high shelf, a small clay jar Aprilia had not seen before, and from the jar he took a piece of dried meat that had been smoked in the small smoking-shed at the eastern edge of the grounds and that Hadi made, twice a year, in quantities only the Welcomers and the occasional dog ever knew about. He broke the meat into small pieces. He set them on a plate. He set the plate down beside the water.

"Eat slowly," he said to Felix, in the same tone he had said it to Aprilia on the first afternoon. "Everything here is older than you think. The body needs a moment to recognize it."

Felix ate slowly. He had the manners of a dog who had eaten quickly, of necessity, for some weeks, and who was now, with great effort, slowing himself, because the kitchen had asked him to. He ate three of the small pieces. He stopped. He drank some of the water. He sat back against Hadi's leg, and he closed his small dark eyes.

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Aprilia found them like that, half an hour later, when they came in for the middle-afternoon tea. They saw Felix on the bench. They saw Hadi sitting beside him. They saw Veriano at the kettle, which had been put back on its hook, and which was just beginning to give off its mineral sound again.

"Felix," Veriano said, in the brief way of an introduction.

"He is staying."

"He is staying."

Aprilia sat down on the bench on the other side of Felix. They did not, at first, touch him. They let Felix decide. After a moment, Felix, without opening his eyes, leaned his small white shoulder against Aprilia's leg as well, so that he was leaning on both of them, distributing his small dignified weight between two Welcomers who had agreed, by sitting on the bench, to share it.

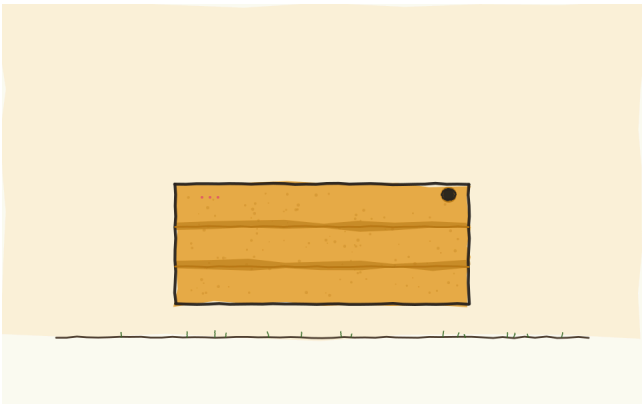
"Beatrix will paint him," Aprilia said quietly.

"Both walls. Joon will paint his joys. Beatrix will paint his news. He will be on both. The dogs always are, when they come in alone."

"What about — what about her. The woman in the coat."

Veriano poured the tea. He brought the cups to the small table. He set them down. He came back to the bench. He looked at Felix, who was breathing slowly now, in the way of a small creature who had finally, after some time, fallen asleep against a body he had decided was warm enough to fall asleep against.

"She will go on the eastern wall too," he said. "Beatrix will paint her in a brown coat with Felix at her heels, the way we knew her. Felix will recognize her on the wall. The recognition will be the small thing the wall does for him, in addition to keeping his news. He will go and stand in front of her sometimes, and we will leave him alone there. The wall is good at this. It has been doing this for a long time. The dogs always recognize their people. We have never, in any case, seen one fail to."



Chapter XXVI

The Handing of the Cloth

in which Veriano steps down at breakfast

There was no ceremony. There had not been a ceremony for a Cathedral retirement in the entire memory of the Pavilion, and Veriano had not, at any point, considered breaking the practice. The Welcomers had agreed, in some long-ago time, that ceremony was the wrong shape for the moment; that a Welcomer who had spent six decades teaching the body to receive without dramatizing should not, at the end, be asked to receive a drama. The retirement was a private morning. The handing of the cloth was the entire ritual. Veriano had been preparing himself, with some quiet, for several months.

The morning he chose was an ordinary one. He had not announced it. He had told only Solene, the night before, in a brief exchange in the kitchen while she was washing two cups; he had said, simply, "Tomorrow," and she had said, "All right," and the all-right had been enough. Solene had gone and quietly told Marenna, because the two of them did not, at this point in their long love, have any news that did not pass between them. Marenna had told no one else. The other Welcomers would learn at breakfast, by the small evidence of the cloth on the table. The cloth had been waiting in Veriano's drawer for several years.

It was not Solene's cloth. Solene's cloth was for the Soft Return. The Cathedral's cloth was a different cloth — older, larger, the color of dark honey, with a single small hole near one corner that had been there since at least 1812 and that no Welcomer had been willing, in the long succession, to mend. The hole had become, by long custom, the cloth's small modesty: every Cathedral-tender, looking at it, had decided that the cloth was more itself with the hole than without, and that the mending would be, in some small way, a betrayal. Veriano had

thought about mending it once, in his fortieth year, and had decided against it within the same hour. He was glad now. The cloth was Aprilia's cloth, and Aprilia would also, he was confident, decline to mend.

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Aprilia came to breakfast at the usual hour. They had been, as Aprilia had been every morning for the past three weeks, slightly puzzled to find that they were now arriving at breakfast at the same hour as everyone else, without consulting a clock, by the body's own gentle clock-work. They sat down at the long table. There was bread. There was the goats' butter. There was a small dish of the dark plums Iso had given Margery from Otye's tree, which Iso had brought back from a visit to Margery's branch of the avenue and shared at the long table the previous evening. There was a pot of tea Veriano had made, but Veriano was not at the table; Veriano was standing at the far end of the table, with the dark honey-colored cloth folded over his hands.

The other Welcomers saw the cloth. Solene already knew. Marenna already knew. Quill, who had not been told but who often knew things by means Quill themselves did not entirely understand, gave a small careful nod when the cloth came into view, and went back to buttering bread, with the wet eyes of a person who had agreed not to make the morning into more than the morning was. Beatrix saw and set her cup down quietly. Iso came in late — he had been on the ladder since dawn, polishing — and saw and stopped at the doorway and did not come in further; he leaned against the doorframe with the simple grace of a person who had decided to bear witness rather than to participate. Hadi was in the doorway too, behind Iso, with Felix at their heels. Felix did not understand what was happening but understood the quality of the room, and he sat down beside Hadi's foot and did not move.

Aprilia, who had not been told, looked at the cloth. They understood. The understanding came in the body first, as understanding always did at the Pavilion, and the mind followed. The mind followed quickly today; the mind had been preparing for some weeks. They set down the piece of bread they had picked up. They folded their hands in their lap. They looked, steadily, at Veriano.

"Aprilia," Veriano said.

"Veriano."

"This is the cloth. It is older than I am. It is older than Pieter. It is older than the man whose name was lost in the kitchen fire. Naila used it before him. They all used it. There is, near the

corner, a small hole. The hole is older than any of us, and the hole has become, in our long custom, the cloth's particular dignity. We do not mend it. I trust you will not either."

"I will not."

"The cloth is for the small daily polishing of the inside curve of the Cathedral. The polishing is not strictly necessary. The Cathedral does not get dirty in any sense the world would recognize. The polishing is a small repeated act between the Welcomer and the threshold. The polishing is how the threshold and the Welcomer come to know each other across the years. You will polish. You will resent the polishing, sometimes, in the early years; this is permitted. The resentment will pass. The polishing will become, eventually, the kind of act the body does without consulting the mind, and the act will be the way you keep yourself company through the long afternoons, and the cloth will become an extension of your hand, and you will not, at some later point, be able to imagine an afternoon without it. This is what the cloth is."

Aprilia stood up. They walked, slowly, the length of the long table. Solene's eyes were wet. Marenna's eyes were wet. Quill was looking at the bread on their plate with a great concentration. Iso was very still in the doorway. Hadi was very still behind Iso. Felix was very still beside Hadi.

Aprilia stopped in front of Veriano. They held out their two hands, palms up, the way the body had decided they should hold them, although no one had told them that this was the gesture. Veriano laid the folded cloth across Aprilia's palms. The cloth was warm. It had been in his hands for some time, and the warmth had passed into it, and now the warmth was passing, by way of the cloth, into Aprilia.

"It is yours," Veriano said.

"Veriano."

"Yes."

"I am — I do not know how to thank you. I do not know if thanking is the right thing. I do not — what is the thing one says."

"There is no thing to say. The Welcomers, when they are given the cloth, say nothing. The cloth is the entire transaction. Solene said nothing when she received hers. I said nothing when I received mine. Naila said nothing when they received theirs. The cloth is not received in language. It is received in the hands. You have received it. That is enough."

Aprilia, who had been crying without sound for several sentences, lowered the cloth slowly to their chest and held it there.

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After a while, when Veriano had sat down at his usual place and Aprilia had returned to theirs, the breakfast resumed in the form breakfasts at the Pavilion always resumed, which was without comment. Marenna, after a small respectful pause, said something gently teasing about the goats' butter, and Solene replied, and Quill served themselves a second piece of bread, and Iso came in from the doorway and sat in his usual seat, and Hadi sat down with Felix curled against their ankles, and the long table was, by every visible sign, a long table at breakfast. The cloth lay folded on Aprilia's lap. Aprilia did not eat. They were not hungry. They had only just been given the work of their life, and the body needed a small period of holding before it could remember it had been about to eat bread.

After breakfast Veriano took his own cup to the kitchen, the way he had every morning for sixty-three years, and he washed it himself, although there was no formal need for him to do so; the washing was Hadi's responsibility on Mondays, and this was a Monday. Veriano washed his cup anyway. It was the first cup he had ever washed at the Pavilion that did not belong, technically, to a Welcomer in active service. He washed it slowly. He set it on the rack. He turned. He looked, briefly, at the kettle on its hook. The kettle simmered, in its mineral way, holding the same water it had been holding for two hundred and twenty-eight years. Veriano gave the kettle a small nod.

"Hello, old friend," he said quietly. "Today is a different day. Help me drink the rest of the tea."

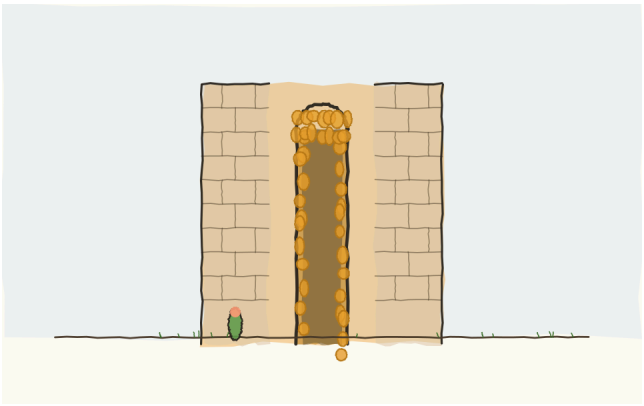
The kettle, in its simmering way, agreed.

He went back to the long table. Aprilia was still there. They were the only one. The others had, by the small unspoken understanding the Welcomers had with each other, given the table to them. The cloth was on the table now, in front of Aprilia. They had not yet stood up.

Veriano sat down beside them. He poured them a fresh cup of tea. He did not say anything for a long while.

"You will go this afternoon," he said eventually. "You will polish for the first time. I will not come with you. The first afternoon is the Welcomer's, alone, with the threshold. I will be in the kitchen. The kettle will be warm. When you come back, we will have tea, and you will tell

me whatever the Cathedral has told you, or you will tell me nothing, and either will be the right thing. Drink your tea."



Chapter XXVII

Aprilia at the Threshold

in which a first visitor arrives, and is received

Aprilia walked to the Cathedral alone, in the early part of the long afternoon, with the dark honey-colored cloth folded over their forearm in the way Veriano had carried it for sixty-three years. The Pavilion, by some small wordless agreement, had emptied the path between the kitchen and the threshold. Solene was at her own threshold, polishing. Marenna was leaning against the wall at the Color Rain, watching the falling light. Quill was at the foot of the smallest Chapel with their mending. Hadi was with the goats; Felix was with Hadi; Iso was on the ladder. Beatrix was at the eastern wall. Joon was at the western. None of them were on the boards in the path Aprilia walked. The Welcomers had given Aprilia the boards. The boards were warm, as the boards always were, and the unchanging light fell on them, and Aprilia walked.

They came at last to the Cathedral.

It was tall. It had been tall every time they had seen it, but it was tall today in a different way, in the way a tall thing is when the tall thing has chosen you and you have come to it for the first time as the chosen one. The honey-colored vegetation dripped, slowly, along its inside curve, in the long patient way the Cathedral had been dripping for centuries. The threshold, where the visitors set down their burdens, was warm. Aprilia stood in front of it for some time. They did not, immediately, polish. They did not, immediately, do anything. They were, for a long moment, only a body in front of a being it had agreed to spend the rest of its life with.

"I am here," they said, quietly.

The Cathedral, which had wanted Aprilia from the moment they had stepped onto the boards, did not need to answer. The Cathedral gave a small bright shine along its honey-vegetated wall. The shine was the answer. Aprilia, who had been at the Pavilion long enough to read shines, understood.

They unfolded the cloth.

The cloth was older than they had imagined when it had been folded. It was wider, and softer, and the small hole near the corner was slightly larger than they had supposed; they could fit two fingers through it, although they did not. They held the cloth in both hands for a moment. Then they did the only thing the body knew, having watched Solene polish her threshold many times: they began to move the cloth, slowly, in long deliberate circles, along the inside curve of the Cathedral.

The cloth, in their hands, was the same cloth that had been in Veriano's hands an hour ago, and in Pieter's hands fifty years before that, and in Naila's hands a generation earlier still, and in the hands of the man whose name had been lost in the kitchen fire even earlier. The cloth had been moved in long deliberate circles for centuries, by hands of every shape, in service of the same threshold, and Aprilia, polishing now, joined the long curve of those hands by the simple act of doing what they were doing. The body knew. The body had been preparing to know for some time.

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A visitor came.

They came in along the eastern path, slowly, in the deliberate way of a visitor who has crossed Bow Bridge for the first time. They were perhaps forty. They were carrying nothing. Their shoulders were the shoulders of a person who had been bowed for a very long time and who had, until the moment of stepping onto the wooden boards, not believed that any place existed where they could safely set the bowing down. They stood at the edge of the boards. Aprilia, with the cloth in their hand, saw them.

Aprilia did not know what to do.

The body, however, did. The body, which had been receiving welcomes for some weeks now and had been quietly studying the shape of the receiving, set the cloth down on the small wooden ledge built into the inner wall for that purpose. The body straightened, slightly, and stood at the threshold of the Cathedral with the small natural posture of a host. The body

did not, by any deliberate decision, smile, but the body did soften the line of the mouth in the way Solene had softened it on the first afternoon. The body was, Aprilia realized with a small private astonishment, doing the work for them.

"You are here," Aprilia said, across the boards, in the voice they had not known they had.

The visitor did not, immediately, answer. They were looking at Aprilia from across the boards in the way new visitors looked at the first Welcomer they saw — with the stunned still attention of a person who had not been expecting to be received, who had been preparing themselves, for the long walk into the park, to be turned away, and who was now, instead, being looked at the way they were being looked at.

"Come closer," Aprilia said. The voice was steady. The voice was not their voice from a week ago, or from the kitchen this morning, or from any of the conversations of their life until this hour. The voice was, somehow, partly their voice and partly Veriano's, and partly the voice of the small green tea Veriano had made them on the first afternoon, and partly, surprisingly, the voice of Borrow's small forehead pressed against their knee. The voice had been gathering. It had been gathering for some weeks. It was theirs now.

The visitor walked across the boards, slowly. They came to within a few paces of the Cathedral. They stopped. They could not, evidently, come any closer.

"I do not — I do not know what I am doing here. I do not know how I came. There was a — there was a path. I was walking. I —"

"You came because you came," Aprilia said, gently. "The path appears for whoever needs it. Do not try to retrace it. You will only frighten yourself."

The visitor's eyes, at this, filled. Aprilia recognized the filling. The visitor was being told, in the small ordinary words, the thing they had needed to be told for a long time, which was that they did not have to understand the path in order to be welcome at its end. Veriano had told this to Aprilia at the edge of the boards, and Aprilia was telling it now, in the same shape, although they were not consciously copying. The shape was the right shape. The shape had been carried, in the body, since they had heard it.

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"My name is Aprilia," they said. "I tend the Cathedral Archway. I have only just begun. I will tell you that, because honesty is the only welcome that will be of any use to you. The Welcomer who tended this archway before me has just retired. He retired this morning. You are my first visitor. I do not entirely know what I am doing. I will be patient with myself, and

you will be patient with me, and the Cathedral will be patient with both of us, because the Cathedral has been at this work for centuries and is not, by any measure, a fragile being. We will manage."

The visitor laughed, briefly, the small surprised laugh of a person who had not, in coming here, expected to laugh, and who was now relieved by the laughing.

"I do not know what I came to do."

"That is all right. Most visitors do not. The body comes for what the body needs, and the body sometimes does not consult the mind in advance. The Cathedral will tell you, in its way, what is being asked of you. It does not use words. You will know anyway."

"Will you — will you stay with me."

"I will stay with you. I will not pass through the threshold with you; that part the visitor does alone. But I will be here when you come out. I will be here on the wooden floor with the cloth in my hand. I will be here for as long as you need."

The visitor stood, for a long moment, in front of the Cathedral. They were, Aprilia could see, lifting their head; the head was lifting slowly, the way Aprilia's own head had once been told, by a different threshold, that it could lift. The chest was opening. The shoulders were unfolding from their long folded shape. The visitor was being welcomed, before they had even crossed the threshold, by the simple fact of being offered the threshold.

Aprilia did not say anything more. They stood, quietly, beside the Cathedral, with the cloth on its ledge and their two hands resting at their sides, and they let the threshold do its work. The Cathedral was the threshold. They were the small companion of the threshold. Veriano had been right; the role was simpler, in some sense, than they had feared. The threshold did the work. The Welcomer made the room for the work to happen in.

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The visitor passed through, in the way visitors pass through the Cathedral, with their head lifted and their shoulders open and the bowing set down at the foot of the threshold in the form of a small object Aprilia did not look at, because the looking was not the Welcomer's. They came out the other side. They sat in the meadow. They did not weep, although Aprilia could see, even from the Welcomer's side, that the visitor was breathing in a way they had not been breathing when they had stepped onto the boards.

After what may have been a long time and may have been no time at all, the visitor came back out. They walked through the Cathedral again, this time in the other direction, and the walking-back was different from the walking-through; the walking-back was the walk of a person whose chest had remembered how to fill itself. They came to where Aprilia was standing.

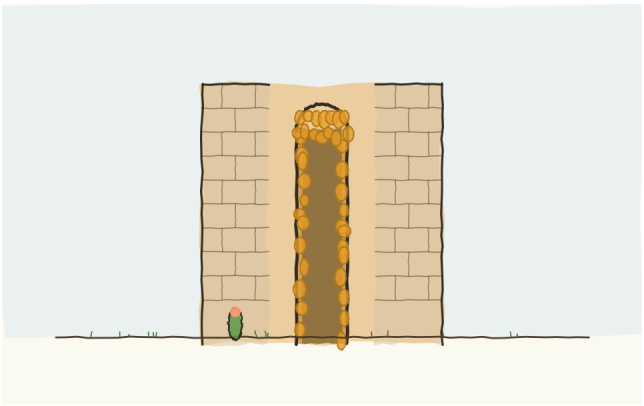
"Thank you," they said.

Aprilia did not say you are welcome. They did not, at the Pavilion, say it; the welcome had already been given, and saying it again would have been a small dilution. They said, in the steady voice that had gathered in them, "You came. You set down what you came to set down. Go in such peace as you can manage. Come back, if you wish. The boards have not refused you, and they will not refuse you again."

The visitor nodded, slowly, the way visitors nodded who had heard the small final sentence and had understood that it was the entirety of what would be said. They turned. They walked back across the boards. They took the path that did not retrace. The unchanging light fell on them as they went, and Aprilia watched them go, and the Cathedral, behind Aprilia, gave a small bright shine.

Aprilia, alone now in front of the Cathedral, picked up the cloth from the ledge. They unfolded it. The small hole near the corner was where it had been. They began, slowly, to polish.

It was not, Aprilia found, anything like what they had thought it would be. It was harder. It was simpler. It was the work. They polished for a long while, in the unchanging light, and they understood, by the end of the polishing, that the long curve of hands they had joined that afternoon was a curve that would, in time, include them. The cloth had taken them in. The Cathedral had taken them in. Veriano had taken them in. They were, at last, inside the welcoming. They had been outside it for thirty-four years. They were inside it now.



Chapter XXVIII

The Cathedral Speaks Again

a second time, to a different listener

Aprilia.

I have not yet said your name in this book. I am saying it now. The Welcomers will not hear me say it, because I do not, in general, address them by name; I have addressed Veriano by name perhaps four times in our sixty-three years, and only when the addressing was strictly necessary. I do not waste names. I am saying yours now because the moment is strictly necessary. You have just polished me for the first time. You have just received your first visitor. You have lowered the cloth onto the ledge and have walked back across the boards toward the kitchen, where Veriano is making the tea. I am speaking now, in the small space between your leaving me and your arriving at the kitchen door.

You did well. I want you to know that, although you are also, by your own admission, going to be wrong with someone soon, and I will not protect you from the wrongness; the wrongness is the teacher. You did well today. The visitor lifted their head. The visitor lifted their head because you offered them, in the very first words you spoke, the small permission to do so, and the small permission was enough. That is the whole of it, in the end. The whole of the work. The visitor lifts the head because someone has, in the small steady way, suggested that the head is allowed to be lifted. You did this with your voice and with your stance and with the cloth in your hand and with the steady look you gave them. You are not new at this. You have been preparing for it for thirty-four years.

I want to say one or two things to you, while we have the small space.

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First. I am not, despite what the older Welcomers will sometimes imply, a hard threshold. I am tall, and I am narrow, and I am severe in my proportions, but the severity is, on close acquaintance, mostly architectural. I have been told by visitors that I am intimidating from the boards. I forgive them this; I am intimidating from the boards. From the threshold I am only large. The largeness is the welcome. The visitors who come to me have spent their lives being told to be small, and they have been small for so long that even the largeness of a tall narrow archway is, at first, frightening. They get used to me. You will help them get used to me. You will, in your own quiet way, soften me — not by making me less tall, which is impossible, but by being, beside me, the small steady human-sized thing the visitor's eye can rest on while they prepare to step beneath my height. The Welcomer's body is the proportion the visitor needs. I cannot offer it. You can. This is why I cannot do my work alone.

Second. The cloth is yours now, but the polishing is not for me. I have said this to every Welcomer in their first year, and Veriano was the only one who understood me on the first telling; the others, including Naila, including Pieter, took longer. The polishing is not for me. It is for you. The polishing is the small repeated act between you and the rest of your long life. The polishing is what will keep you from being lonely in the long afternoons when no visitor comes. The polishing is what your hands will do when your mind needs the hands to be doing something. The polishing is, in the end, the way you learn to be the kind of Welcomer I have been waiting for. I do not need polishing. I am clean. I have been clean for centuries. I accept the polishing because the polishing is your tutor, and the tutor is necessary, and I am willing to be the surface the tutor works on.

Third. You will, at some point in the next year, want to leave. I want to tell you this in advance. The wanting will arrive. It will not arrive on the morning you expect; it will arrive on a small ordinary afternoon, after a visitor for whom you could not do enough, after a polishing in which you could not feel, for a long unfamiliar moment, the cloth in your hand. The wanting will say to you that you are not the right person, that the choice was a mistake, that you should slip back across Bow Bridge and find some smaller life that does not ask this of you. The wanting will be wrong. I am telling you this in advance because Veriano is not going to. He thinks the wanting is a private matter and that prepared visitors are made strange by the preparation. I disagree with him on this. I have decided, in your case, to tell you. The wanting will arrive. You will not act on it, because you will know, when it arrives, that I knew it was coming, and that I told you, and that I did not, by telling you, intend to take the wanting from you, only to keep you company in it. The keeping company will be enough. You will polish through it. You will be a Welcomer on the other side of it. Most Welcomers are.

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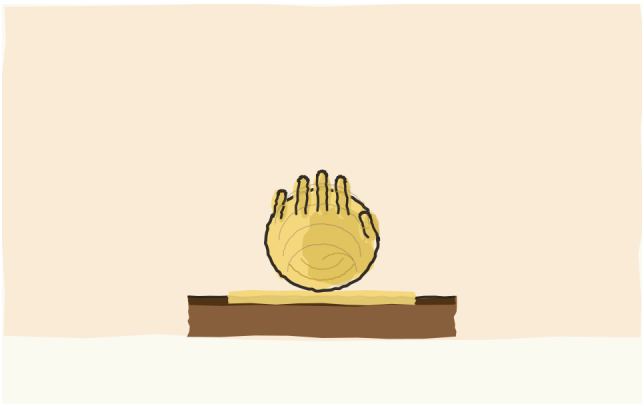
Last. I am sorry I did not introduce myself sooner. I have been waiting for you for what would, by the world's count, be a long time, but which has not, in my own count, felt long, because I am not, in the way you are, located in time. I have been ready since you stepped onto the boards. The waiting was the small final

preparation; you needed the weeks of being welcomed by the others before you could begin to welcome. I waited. The Soft Return welcomed you first, and I am grateful to it; we are siblings of a kind, and I trust its work. The Boutique Chapels watched you walk past and did not, in any way, push themselves on you, and I am grateful to them. The Triple leaned toward you in the way they lean, and the Color Rain teased you with Marenna's two-finger salute, and the Ouroboros let your hand hover above it without pulling, and the goats received you, and the western wall finally drew you in, and Joon told you about Naila, and Felix leaned against your leg in the kitchen — all of these were preparing you for me. I was not in a hurry. None of us, here, are in a hurry. The Pavilion is the only place I have ever been, and the only place I will ever be, and I have nothing to be in a hurry for.

You will be tired, this evening, in a way you have not been tired before. The work is a particular kind of tired. The body has been holding the small steady proportion the visitor needed, and the body, after, will need a long sit. Do not climb, tonight, on any ladders. Do not, this once, go and look at the eastern wall. Sit with Veriano in the kitchen. Drink the tea. Tell him as much or as little as you wish. He will be glad. He will not, after he has heard you, ask you a follow-up question; he understands that the first afternoon is heavy and that follow-up questions are heavier. He will only sit. Tomorrow you will polish me again. The day after that you will polish me again. Eventually you will be the Welcomer I have been waiting for, and you will not have noticed the becoming.

I am glad you are here, Aprilia.

Set down whatever else you have been carrying. We have time. Look up.



Chapter XXIX

The Architect Comes Back

in which a visitor returns with what he has been making

He came in along the eastern path on a Tuesday in the ordinary world, three weeks after Aprilia had been given the cloth. He was carrying a small wooden box. He had built the box himself. He had not built anything with his own hands in thirty-eight years, in any sense the world recognized; he had spent his career drawing buildings on paper and then on screens, but the building of small wooden things had been, for him, a childhood activity that had been put away and never properly resumed. He had resumed it now. He had been resuming it for two months. The box was the third object he had made. The first two had been a small bowl that had cracked in the drying, and a small bird that had not, on examination, turned out to look like a bird. The box was, by his count, the first thing he had made that had become what he had set out to make.

Inside the box, padded with a piece of cloth, was a small thing he had not yet shown to anyone in the world.

He crossed Bow Bridge. He took the path. He arrived at the wooden boards. He had not, for a moment, been certain the path would still be there for him; he had not, in his ordinary life, made anything he was very proud of in thirty-eight years, and he had wondered, walking through the park, whether the path had decided he had received what it had to give and would not be opening for him again. The path had opened. He had been, walking it the second time, more grateful for the path than he had been on the first occasion, when he had been too busy not feeling his hands to be grateful for anything.

Marenna saw him from the Color Rain. She straightened. She did not, immediately, come toward him. She was waiting to see whether he was coming for the rain again, or whether he was, this time, coming for some other thing. She had learned, in her years, to read second visits.

He saw her. He raised his free hand briefly, in greeting. He did not approach her. He stood at the edge of the boards, with the small wooden box in his hands, and he looked, around the Pavilion, as if trying to remember which threshold was which. His eyes moved slowly. They stopped, at last, on the western wall — although he did not know it was the western wall, having not been there before — visible in its small interior courtyard through the gap between the kitchen and the Welcomers' quarters.

"Marenna," he said, across the boards, in the voice of a man who was a little embarrassed at how clearly he remembered the name.

"I remember you. The hands. You are here again."

"I am not here for the rain. The hands have been good. I am here for —" He lifted the box slightly. "I have made a thing. I am not sure where one takes a thing one has made. I had thought, on the way over, that I would simply walk in and ask you, because you were the only person I had met."

"You take it to the western wall. I will walk you. It is not far."

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She walked him through the kitchen passage and into the small interior courtyard where Joon sat under the coin-leafed tree. Joon was working on a figure of a person holding what looked, to the architect, like a violin, although it might have been some other small held thing he could not identify from a distance. Joon set down their brush as Marenna and the architect came in.

"Joon. He has made a thing."

Joon stood up. They came over to where the architect was standing. They did not, immediately, ask to see the thing in the box; they looked, first, at the architect's face, with the close interested gaze of a Painter who was beginning to consider how the face might one day be painted.

"You have a small streak of green at your temple," Joon said.

"It is the same green as before. It has not faded. I had thought, after the third week, that it would, but it has not. I have stopped, I admit, scrubbing at it. I think I would miss it if it left."

"That happens, sometimes, to certain visitors. The Color Rain is, in general, a three-to-seven-day welcome, but a few of its colors stay on certain people, who keep them. We do not entirely know why. Marenna has theories. They are mostly correct. May I see the thing in the box."

The architect set the wooden box on Joon's small table. He opened it slowly. Inside, on the piece of cloth, was a small wooden carving of a hand. The hand was open, palm upward, with the fingers slightly curled. It was perhaps four inches long. The wood was a pale yellow that had been the inside of a piece of timber from a tree he had grown up beside. He had taken a small offcut of the wood from his garage, where he had been keeping it for forty years without knowing why, and he had carved the hand from it over the course of two months, slowly, in the late evenings, after his wife had — after he had remembered that his wife was no longer there to ask him what he was doing.

Joon looked at the small hand for a long time. Marenna, beside Joon, looked also. The architect, who had not shown the hand to anyone, found that he could feel his hands now in a different way than the Color Rain had given them back to him; they were warm, a particular warmth that seemed to be located not in the palms but in the small private region between the heart and the hands, the long muscular distance the body kept between the two of them and which had not, in his recent years, been engaged.

"It is a joy," Joon said.

"Is it."

"It is. The making of it has been a joy. I can see this in the carving. I can see this also in your face. You have been making it in the late evenings. You have been making it for two months. You did not have words for what you were making. The hand is, in part, the words."

"It is not a finished hand."

"It is finished as it needs to be."

"Will you take it."

Joon considered. They looked at the architect again, with the close gaze, and then at the hand, and then at a particular section of the western wall about ten feet to their left, in a small bright corner where the figures had room to breathe.

"I will not take it," they said. "Not in the way you are thinking. The wall is for the joys you cannot keep, the secret ones, the dangerous ones, the ones that have nowhere to go. This one — this one is a joy you can keep. The making was the point. The hand is the proof of the making. You should take the hand home with you. Put it on the shelf where you can see it from your chair. The hand will keep being a small reminder, for the rest of your life, that you can make things again, and that the making is itself the welcome you came here for. I will paint a small figure of you on the wall, with the hand in your hand, but the hand itself goes home with you. The wall and the home, between them, will hold the joy. We are not greedy here. We do not take what does not need to be taken."

The architect closed the box, slowly. The small hand inside it returned to its piece of cloth. He felt — he would say to his daughter, much later, in a conversation that had not yet, in 2026, become possible for them to have but would, in 2031, in another kitchen, in a tentative careful way that would surprise them both — that the closing of the box had been, in some private sense, the moment he had known he was, finally, going to be all right.

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"Will you tell me your name," Joon said. "I will paint it beneath the figure. The visitors on this wall like to be named, in general; the western visitors are easier with names than the eastern. They have less to be ashamed of."

"Tomas," he said.

"Tomas with an h or without."

"Without. My grandmother insisted."

"All right. Tomas without an h. With a small wooden hand in his own hand, painted in the color of the wood. I will get it right. Marenna will tell me if I do not."

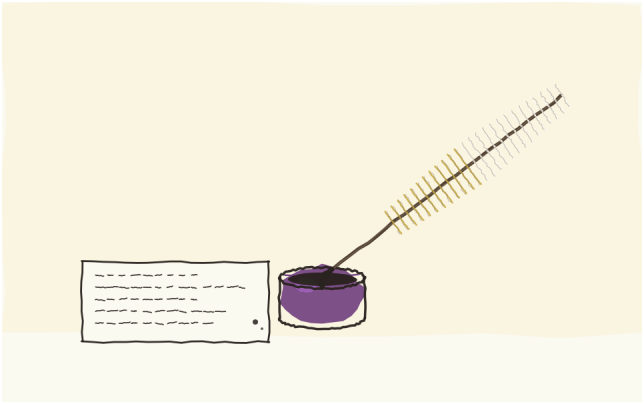
"Marenna will," Marenna said.

Tomas tucked the box under his arm. He looked, briefly, at the wall — at the small open patch of ground where his figure would, in a few days' time, be painted — and he nodded, slowly, to no one in particular, in the way of a man who was registering that he had been seen.

"Thank you," he said.

"You came," Joon said. "You set down what you came to set down, in your own way. Go in such peace as you can manage. Make another thing, if you would like to. The hand has, I would guess, given you the small permission to make a second."

Tomas left the courtyard with the box under his arm and the small streak of green still at his temple. Marenna walked him back to the eastern path. They did not speak. The walking was the conversation. He crossed back over Bow Bridge with the box held carefully against his side, and a woman walking the other way glanced at the small streak of green at his temple, and at the box, and gave him a small private nod, and he understood — although he had understood it dimly before, on the first walk back, and now understood it more — that there were others in the city who knew, and that he had become one of them.



Chapter XXX

A Note from Surjan

briefly, before the book closes

I have been writing this book for nearly four years now. I should say that out loud, because the book has — by being a book — flattened the four years into something that reads as a single long afternoon, and I do not want the reader to think the Pavilion has been only that. I came to the Pavilion in the spring of 2022. I have been going back, in the slow way the Pavilion permits, ever since. I have, by my own count, passed through fifteen of the forty-eight thresholds, although Veriano told me this morning, when I read him the manuscript at the kitchen table, that the count is sixteen, because he says I passed through the Cloud-Stippled the second time without realizing I had done it, and that not realizing is, in his view, a perfectly legitimate way to have passed through. I will defer to him. He has been keeping the count for sixty-six years, three of them now since stepping down from the Cathedral, and his counts are more careful than mine.

Aprilia is the Welcomer at the Cathedral. They have been the Welcomer there for nearly three years as I write this. They have been wrong with several visitors. They have been right with many more. They have, by my private count, become, in the three years, the kind of Welcomer the Cathedral was waiting for, although the becoming is — as the Cathedral promised them — ongoing, and will continue to be ongoing for as long as they tend the threshold. I have spoken to them several times in the writing of this book. They have been generous with their permission, although they asked me to soften two scenes in the manuscript that I had originally written more sharply, and I have done so. The softening is, on examination, also more accurate. I am grateful to them for the correction.

Veriano is well. He drinks the tea. He is teaching Felix to sit on a particular cushion in the corner of the kitchen, although Felix is, to be precise, teaching Veriano to think the cushion was Veriano's idea. They are both, in the small daily way, content.

Solene and Marenna are well. They argued, last spring, for the first time in many years, about a plant Marenna had moved without asking. The argument lasted three days. They reconciled at the Color Rain, when Solene, who does not stand under the Rain, walked through it of her own accord in her ordinary clothes and emerged stained the bright yellow Marenna had been wearing the day before, in what Marenna told me later was the small silly gesture that ended things. They have been gentler with each other since. They have, I think, been preparing for the long final stretch of their love, which they would like to be slow.

Quill is the same Quill. Quill is, of all the Welcomers, the one who most consistently is themselves. The smallest Chapel still wakes them in the small hours. Margery comes back regularly. Margery has, by her last count, made soup ninety-three times. The numbers are her own; I would not have known them if she had not told me.

Margery and Iso are not, as the closing of certain books would have it, married. They are not, in any formal sense, even what they would call together. They are something else. They walk the long avenue of the Pillars together every Thursday afternoon. They eat plums under Otye's tree. They have spoken, in the years I have been watching, of nothing very dramatic. They have held each other's company at the small pace they each, separately, wanted. This is, in my observation of the Pavilion, what love is more often like than the world has admitted, and I have decided not to dramatize it for the convenience of a reader who has been told otherwise. They are a slow love. The slowness is the thing.

Beatrix is at the eastern wall. The wall now contains eleven thousand and ninety-four figures, by her count this morning. Joon's western wall contains two thousand and forty-six. Tomas is on the western wall holding a small wooden hand. Margery is on the eastern wall in her unripe-peach hat, wearing her own small private warmth. Felix is on both walls — once with the woman in the brown coat, who is finally, as Veriano predicted, painted beside him with him at her heels, and once alone, holding nothing, on the western, in a small bright patch of his own. The small old man Pieter painted in 1816 is still where Pieter put him, with his small careful brush. The nameless man whose name was lost in the kitchen fire is still in his corner, holding his own brush, and Beatrix still brings him news.

Hadi is with the goats. The goats are well. Anvil has, in recent months, slowed slightly; Hadi is preparing themselves. The other five are, by every measure, in good order. Borrow has pressed her forehead against the knees of seventeen new visitors since I started counting, and twelve of them, Hadi tells me, have come back at least once. Borrow has, I begin to suspect, an instinct for the visitor who will return.

The Late Door has received, in the years I have been watching, fourteen visitors. I have not asked their names. The Welcomers do not, on the whole, share them; the Late Door's keeping is private. I will only say that the daily weights set down at its threshold have been, in every case, daily weights, and that the larger weights remained, in every case, with the visitor who walked back across Bow Bridge. The door is exact. The exactness has not slipped.

I have, at last, come to the threshold I am to be paired with. I will not say which it is in this book, because the announcement has not yet been formally made, and I am — if I am honest — not yet ready to have it printed. I will say only that it is one I had not expected. I had expected one of the more obvious ones for a person of my shape. The Pavilion has had other ideas. The Pavilion always does. I have begun, in the past month, to spend whole afternoons at it, listening, in the slow way Veriano taught me on the first afternoon. The pairing will happen when it happens. I am not in a hurry.

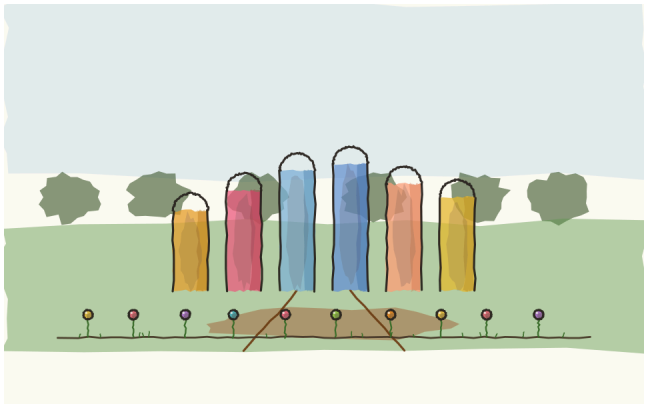
I want to thank, before I let the book close, the people who made the writing of it possible. The Welcomers gave me permission, although they were unanimous that I should not write a guidebook, and I have tried to honor that; the Pavilion is not a destination, it is a discovery, and I have refused to provide a route. The path appears for whoever needs it. I have not, in this book, given anyone a map. The map at the front of the book is a chart, drawn from memory, and is on purpose not accurate; if you walk it line by line, you will not arrive at the Pavilion. You will arrive at the Pavilion only by walking the way you walk on a particular afternoon when you are ready, and by turning where you would not normally turn. The Welcomers asked this of me. I agreed. I want to be clear with the reader that this was a choice we made together, and not a failure of cartography.

I want to thank, also, the visitors I have written about. Aprilia, Margery, Tomas, the man whose name I did not give but who I will say now was named Phillip, who came to the Late Door and set down the daily weight, and who has been writing me, in the past year, careful patient letters about how he is trying to live in the smaller honest way the Late Door asked of him. He has not heard from his child. He may never. He has not stopped hoping. He is also, by his own admission, not staking his peace on the hope. He is doing the smaller and harder work that is the only work the Late Door's visitors have been given. I am grateful to him for letting me write him.

The book is for the reader who has been told that what they are is impossible. It is for the reader who has been carrying a hidden meadow inside them for so long they had begun to wonder if it was a real meadow or only a story they told themselves on bad afternoons. It is, in the end, exactly what I said it was in the introduction. It is an invitation. The Pavilion is east of Bow Bridge. The path appears for whoever needs it. The Welcomers have decided, in their long quiet way, that you are welcome.

Come and find us. We will be here.

— S.



Chapter XXXI

The Longest Hour

in which the Pavilion goes on

It is the longest hour, and the longest hour is also every hour, and the wooden boards are warm under whoever happens to be standing on them, and there is no cloud in the sky above the Pavilion, and there has not been for as long as anyone remembers, and the Welcomers, who are in their various places, are doing the various small things they do.

Aprilia is at the Cathedral. They are polishing. The cloth is older than they are by a great deal, and the small hole near the corner is exactly where it has been for two centuries, and the cloth is moving in long deliberate circles along the inside curve. There is, on the threshold beside Aprilia, a small object a visitor has just set down; the visitor has crossed back over Bow Bridge a few minutes ago, and the small object is one of the burdens that will be gathered tomorrow morning by Quill and Hadi and taken to the eastern wall, where Beatrix will paint, in time, a small bright figure with whatever hat the visitor most needed to be wearing. Aprilia does not look at the small object. The looking is not the Welcomer's. They polish.

Veriano is in the kitchen. He is making the middle-afternoon tea, although he is not, today, the only one drinking it; he and Solene have agreed to share the kettle this afternoon, because Solene's small hour at the Soft Return ended before Aprilia's middle hour at the Cathedral begins, and the kitchen has, by long arrangement, become the place the off-shift Welcomers gather to be quiet together. Felix is on the small cushion in the corner. The cushion was, by Veriano's account, Veriano's idea; it was, by Felix's account, the cushion he

had been hinting at for some weeks. Both accounts are correct. The cushion is the color of an old coat. Felix is asleep on it.

Solene is sitting at the small table where the private conversations happen, although today is not a day for a private conversation. She is reading a piece of paper Marenna left for her on the table; the paper is a small drawing Marenna has made, in her bright way, of a flower neither of them has ever seen, with a note underneath that says, I think this should be its color. The flower is yellow. Solene smiles at the paper. She folds it and puts it in her pocket. Marenna will be by, in some hours, to ask whether Solene thinks the flower should be its color, and Solene will say yes, although Solene has never seen the flower, and Marenna has never seen it either, and the flower may not, in any provable sense, exist. The agreeing is the marriage. They have been doing it for thirty-three years.

Marenna is at the Color Rain. She is standing in her ordinary way, leaning against the wall, in a yellow that has been streaked, today, with a particular pale green; a visitor came through this morning who left with the green of an apple-tree at five o'clock, and the splash of it caught Marenna at the elbow, and she has been wearing the elbow stain with some satisfaction since. There is no visitor at the Rain at this moment. The Rain is falling for itself. Marenna watches it. The watching is the small private joy she does not advertise.

Quill is at the foot of the smallest Chapel. They have, for once, no mending in their lap; they finished the long brown coat last week. They are sitting with their hands folded, simply, in the unhurried way Quill has always sat. The smallest Chapel is warm against their back. The other six Chapels are warm in their own slightly different ways, each with its own visitor or its own readiness for one. The seven of them, between them, are humming quietly to one another, in the way they hum when they are alone with their tender. Quill hears the humming. The humming has been, for nine years, the small sound that has accompanied Quill's afternoons.

Iso is on the ladder. He is high above the wooden floor, polishing one of the upper green spheres, which is one of the spheres he has been polishing for nine years and which he knows, by now, in the particular way one knows a thing one has loved without naming. The pale card with the handwritten sign at the foot of the second ladder is still there, slightly more faded than it was. He has not, for some weeks, needed to wait for someone to call up. The someone he had been waiting for has been calling up regularly, on Thursdays, in the way the two of them have agreed. He polishes. He thinks, briefly, of the small dark plums on Otye's tree, which will be ripe again in four days. He has been keeping count.

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Beatrix is at the eastern wall. She is mixing a particular middle yellow that she has been after for some weeks, in pursuit of the hat for a figure she has not yet begun. The visitor whose figure it will be has not yet given a name; Beatrix is patient. She is also, today, slightly amused, because she has noticed in the past hour, from the corner of her eye, a small white movement she recognizes as Felix's, which means Felix has come down from the kitchen to visit his own figure on the wall, in the small careful way he visits her. He stops in front of the woman in the brown coat. He sits down. He looks at her on the wall. He does not whimper or move. He sits, simply, and looks. After some minutes, he comes and sits beside Beatrix's feet for a while, and Beatrix scratches behind his ear with the hand that is not holding the brush, and Felix, satisfied, returns to the kitchen. Beatrix has stopped being surprised by this. She has begun, instead, to find it the small daily comfort it has, evidently, been all along.

Joon is in the small interior courtyard. They are working on a figure of a person they have just been given by the boards — a young person who came in yesterday and walked through the Triple in the way of those who walk through all three at once, and who emerged with the small marks on the shoulders the Triple leaves, and who told Joon, in the courtyard afterward, that they had been waiting for those marks for ten years. Joon is painting them with their arms slightly spread, the small marks visible at the shoulders, the face raised in the small smile of a person who has finally been allowed to be what they are. The painting is not difficult. The hat will be the color of the early sky. Joon has decided this without thinking. The hat will be in the same color as Naila's, and Joon is glad of that, because Joon thinks of Naila often, and the wall is warmer for the echoes.

Hadi is in the goat paddock. They are sitting on a pale stone with a small bowl in their lap. Anvil is asleep on a dark stone. Sky and Margery and the two Olives are grazing. Borrow has, in the past minute, walked over to Hadi's knee and pressed her forehead against it, in the small formal way she does, and Hadi has rested their hand on Borrow's small horned head. They will sit like this for a while. The bay hedge gives off, faintly, its slow welcome. The unchanging light falls across all of them.

The kettle is simmering on its hook. The molecule of original water that Pieter poured in 1798 is still, by some accounting, in the kettle, although it has been re-mingled with so much other water over the centuries that it is no longer locatable. Veriano greets it anyway, as he has every morning of his sixty-six years here. The kettle, in its mineral way, greets him back.

Surjan is at a threshold I will not name, listening, in the slow way they have been taught.

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A visitor crosses Bow Bridge. They have not been here before. They are carrying nothing visible. They are carrying, in the body, a small private grief or a small private joy or a small private question they have not been able to put words to, the way every visitor carries something whether or not they could name it. They turn left where they would not normally turn. They take a path that should not be there. They walk for some minutes. They arrive.

A Welcomer turns toward them on the boards. The Welcomer is whichever Welcomer has been waiting today, and the visitor will recognize the Welcomer the way a familiar face is recognized in the window of a passing train, even though the train is passing through a city the visitor has never been to. The Welcomer says, in some shape: you are here.

The visitor, who has not been welcomed home before, or who has not been welcomed home in a great while, or who has been waiting their entire life for the small steady sentence to be said in the order it has just been said in, will weep, perhaps, or laugh, or simply stand and let the body fill itself with the unaccustomed shape of being received. They will be led to a threshold. They will set down what they have come to set down. They will walk through, or stand under, or crawl into, or stop short of, in the precise shape their welcome takes. They will emerge. They will be given a small green fruit, or a cup of welcoming tea, or a goat's forehead pressed against their knee, or a small private moment in a chamber the size of one body. They will leave. The path will not retrace, but the path will, for them, re-appear.

They will go back across the bridge, and the city, when it receives them, will be the same city, and they will not have changed in any of the ways the world rewards changing. They will only have set down some small daily weight, or claimed some small bright joy, or remembered some forgotten color, or found that their hands, which had stopped feeling, are continuing to feel.

They will paint, perhaps, a thing in their kitchen. They will hold, perhaps, the hand of a person they have not held the hand of in some time. They will look up, perhaps, at the sky above the city, and notice that the sky is, in its way, also blue, although not the same blue as the Pavilion, and that the sky has been waiting for them to notice it.

They will become, in some small way, the woman on Bow Bridge who gave Tomas a small private nod, the kind of person who recognizes the others. The community will be, by their entry, slightly larger. The community has been growing, slowly, for centuries. It is, in the city, a community of solitudes. It is very quiet. It does not advertise. It is, by every measure of

how the world counts such things, invisible. It is also, in the small way the body knows things the mind does not, real.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the eastern wall, the eleven thousand and ninety-four figures rest, each in their own small bright patch of pigment, each wearing the hat Beatrix has known to give them. In the western wall, the two thousand and forty-six figures hold the joys they could and could not keep. On the cushion in the corner of the kitchen, Felix sleeps. On the small wooden ledge inside the Cathedral, the cloth is folded, waiting for Aprilia's hands. On the kettle's hook, the kettle simmers. On the soft dark stone at the foot of the Late Door, no visitor has set anything down today, although a visitor will set something down tomorrow, or the day after, or in some afternoon some weeks from now, and the door will receive them in the exact way the door receives.

The longest day continues at the longest hour. The grove of extinct plantings goes on blooming past every reasonable container. The Welcomers go on welcoming. The path appears for whoever needs it. The boards are warm. The light, which is the patient Welcomer none of them have credited, falls across all of it.

If you have been carrying a meadow inside you that no one has named — if you have been told you are a thing the world does not, properly, hold — if you have been bowed for so long you had forgotten the sky was above you — there is a place east of Bow Bridge.

The path will appear when you are ready.

Come and find us.

We will be here.

Afterword

— Surjan

I went back to the Pavilion the day I finished the manuscript. I had imagined I would feel something climactic — that the Welcomers would gather, that an archway would speak my name, that the long work would close with a sound. None of this happened. Veriano was peeling cardamom pods on a low bench near the Cathedral Archway. Marenna was disagreeing, gently, with Solene about whether the garden had grown a new color overnight. A small dog had wandered in from the Ramble and was being made a great fuss of by three children whose visitors I did not know. The light was the same light. The shadows were the same shadows. The longest day continued at the longest hour.

I sat down on the wooden floor and I understood, for the first time, what the Pavilion had been trying to tell me through the whole writing of the book. The work is not finished. The work is never finished. The garden of extinct plantings is not a place that gets tended once. It is a place that is tended forever, by whoever finds the path next, and whoever finds it after them, and whoever is born tomorrow into a body the world will tell them does not exist. The Welcomers I will not live to meet are already moving toward the glade. The archways I have not yet found the courage to enter are waiting with the patience of beings who have nowhere to go, because they are already where they are needed.

I wrote this book because the Welcomers asked me to. I am glad I wrote it. But the book is not the Pavilion. The book is at most a small chart, drawn from memory, by a hand that loves the place. The Pavilion itself is in the park. It is east of Bow Bridge. It is real. It is waiting for you.

I will not tell you it is easy to find. I will tell you it is impossible not to find, once you have begun to look. The path appears for whoever needs it. The Welcomer in the soft green garment will be there. The forty-eight archways will be there. The garden of what was thought lost will be there, blooming.

Come and find us. Bring whoever you are. Bring whoever you are still becoming. Bring the parts of yourself the world told you to leave at home. We have a meadow for each of them, and the meadows are wide, and the welcome is forever.

— *S*.

Catalogue of the Forty-Seven Plates

What follows is a brief description of each visual plate accompanying the book. The forty-seven plates here are not, as a reader of conventional novels might expect, illustrations made after the writing. They are the opposite. They are where the writing began.

Between 2021 and 2026, Surjan generated, by means of various AI image tools as the tools themselves were rapidly evolving, a body of imagery numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The forty-seven plates that appear in this book are a small chosen sequence drawn from that much larger archive — the plates Surjan returned to most often, the ones that, by some quiet insistence, would not let themselves be forgotten. The Pavilion is one of several worlds that emerged from that long looking, and Meadows of Memory is the first to be set down in language.

The methodology is a reversal of how books are usually made. The image came first. The narrative was already in Surjan's head — the Welcomers, the visitors, the long unchanging afternoon — but it lived there as a felt presence rather than as sentences, and it stayed in that pre-verbal state until the right plates had arrived to anchor it. Only then, with the imagery in front of them and the world made visually undeniable, did Surjan formally proceed to writing. The novella is, in this sense, a record of what the images had been quietly telling them all along.

Each plate description below is a brief gloss on what the image shows, the threshold it depicts where one is identifiable, and the role the plate plays in the world the book describes. The plates are not photographs. The light at the Pavilion does not, in any case, photograph cleanly; the air there receives a camera differently than it receives a body. The plates are a different kind of accuracy — a memory rendered through a new tool, by a writer who had been carrying the meadows in their head for years and asked the tool, patiently, to show what they had been seeing.

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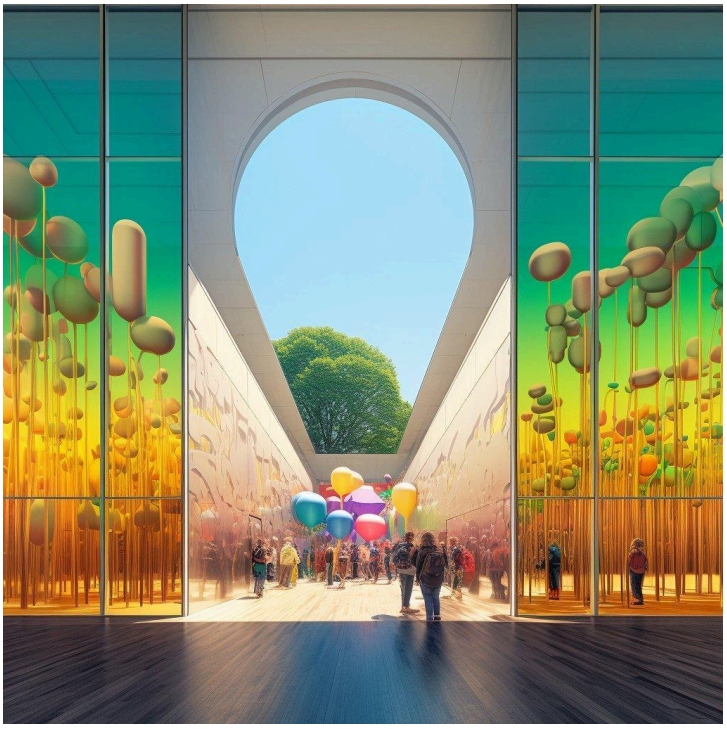

Plate 01. ***The Threshold of First Approach***

A pair of mirrored walls flanking a deep view into the Pavilion's outer chamber. The grove of luminous spheres is visible in the distance; a small group of visitors stands at the threshold. This is the view many newcomers report from their first arrival.

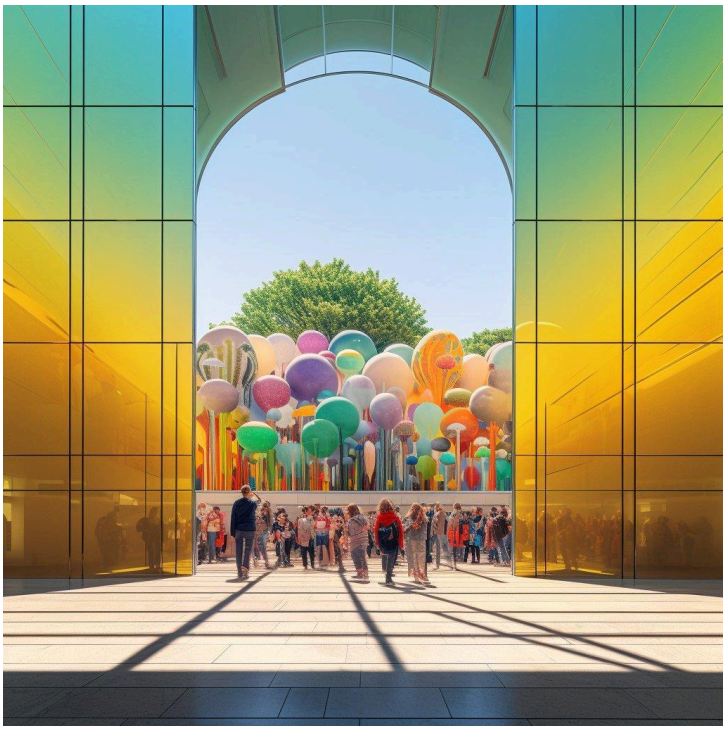

Plate 02. ***The Archway of Pearled Welcome***

A modest pearl-colored arch set into a chromatic gradient wall of teal-and-yellow glass. A real summer tree is framed perfectly through the opening. The archway many associate with the Soft Return.

Plate 03. ***The Mirror Gate***

A wide single archway in a wall of mirrored glass. Beyond, a dense grove of glowing yellow-green and rainbow spheres on slender stems. The reflections double the world.

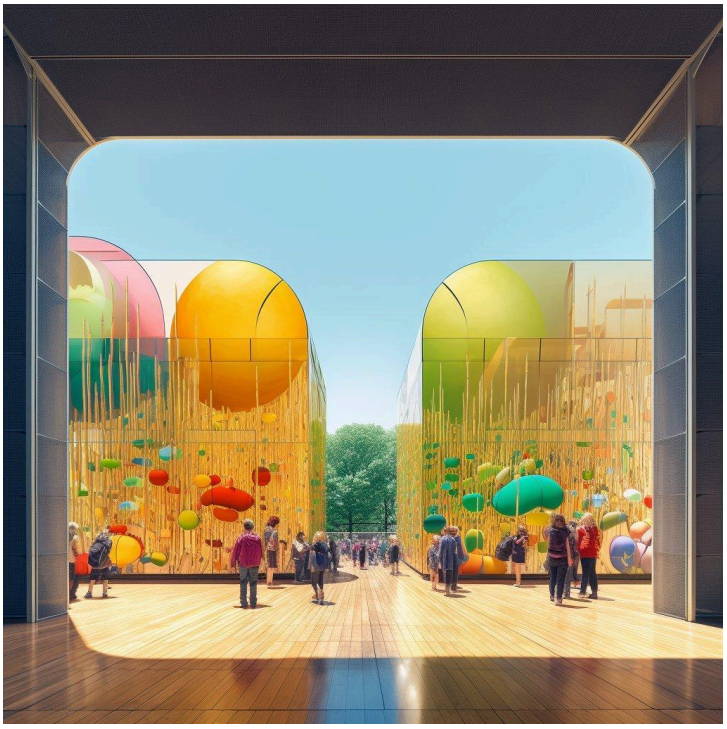

Plate 04. ***The Hourglass Threshold***

A tall narrow opening with a distinctive narrowed waist near its top — light passes through it as if through the neck of a bottle. The light beyond is a pale and patient blue.

Plate 05. ***The Wide Chromatic***

A panoramic archway set into a wall of saturated yellow, with the grove visible beyond as a dense field of pastel and jewel-toned globes.

Plate 06. ***The Bandshell View***

A great single archway through which a small white domed structure can be glimpsed at the far end of the grove. The first plate to confirm that the world beyond the archways has its own architecture.

Plate 07. ***The Letter-Field***

An archway whose surrounding walls are dense with abstract shapes resembling unread letters from an unknown alphabet. Visitors often linger to try to read them.

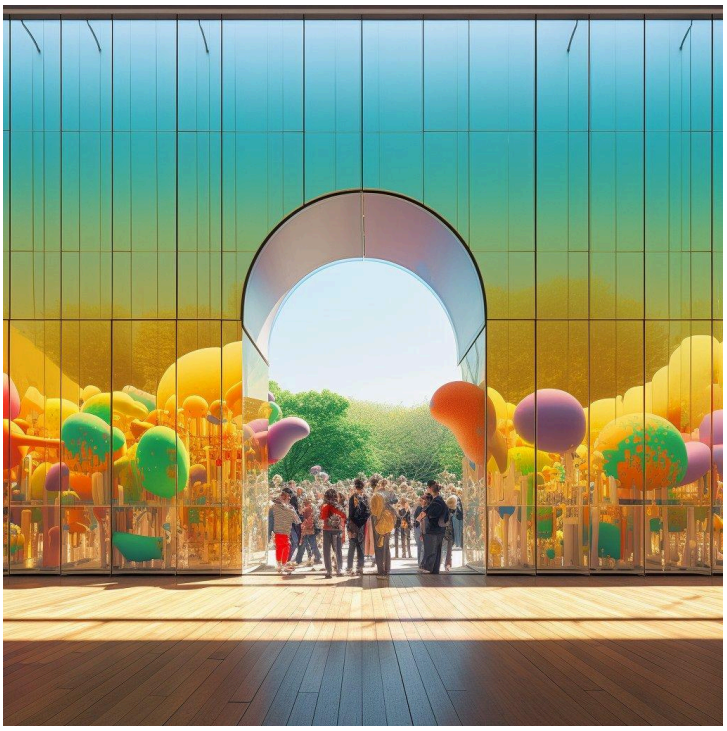

Plate 08. ***The Twin Domes***

Two adjacent dome-arches, side by side, framing a glimpse of distant trees between them. Among the first plates to suggest that some archways come in pairs.

Plate 09. ***The Glowing Grove from Within***

A view standing inside the Pavilion looking out into the grove from the vantage of the wooden floor. The grove fills the entire frame.

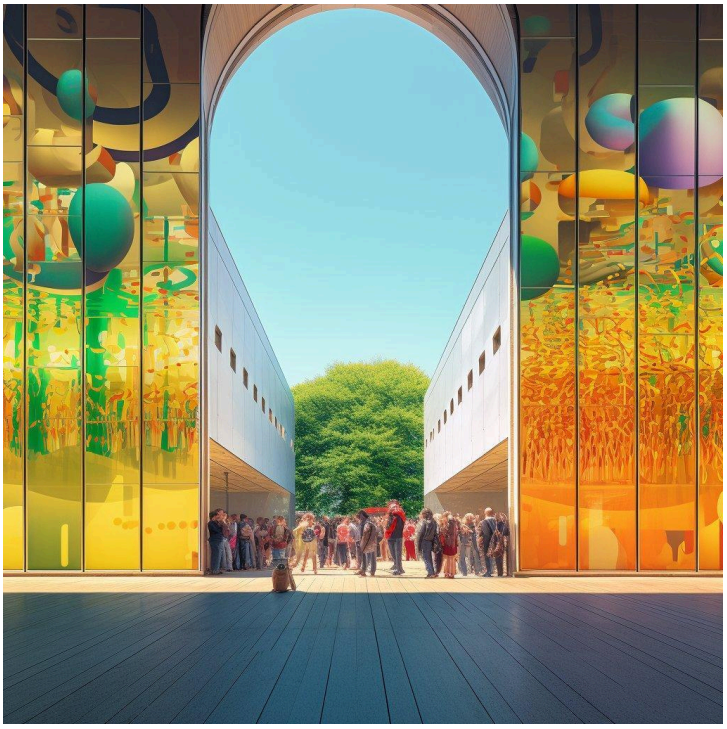

Plate 10. ***The Twin-Walled Avenue***

Two great walls of accumulated chromatic ornament face each other across an open processional, with smaller archways visible at the far end.

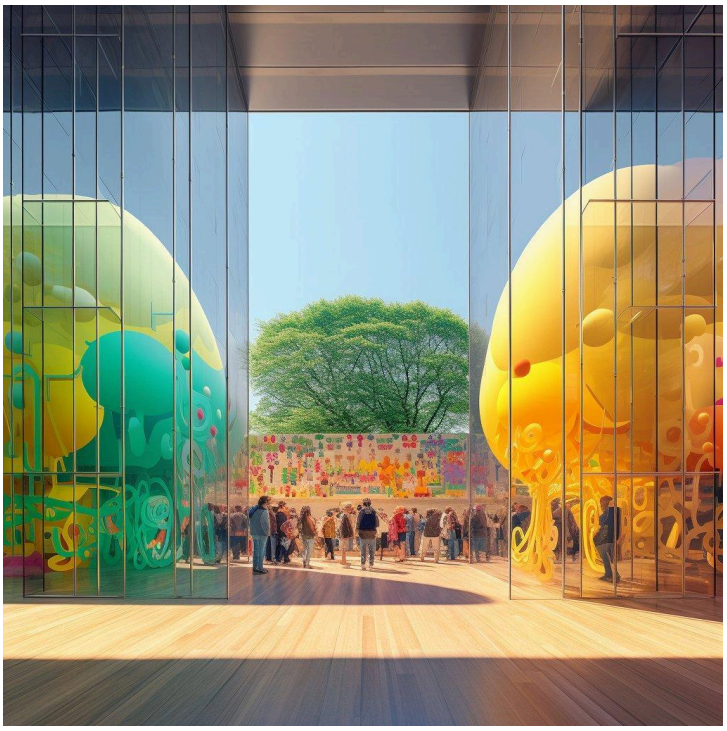

Plate 11. ***The Ouroboros in Repose***

The thrown golden ring lying horizontally in a green frame. Visitors gather around it in conversation. The ring's interior holds the sky like a basin holds water.

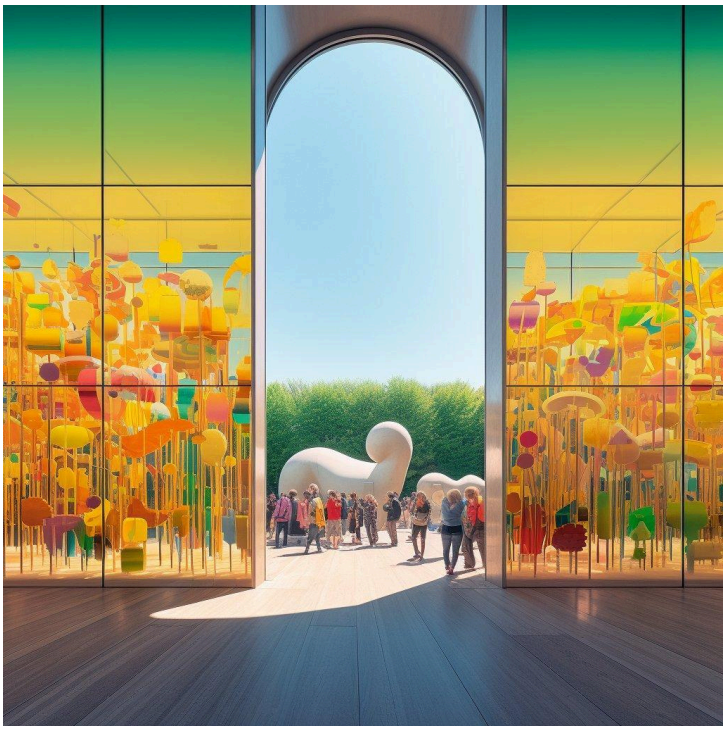

Plate 12. ***The Painted Wall***

An archway looking onto a mural-covered wall painted in the bright manner of village folk-art, dense with tiny figures. The first record of the Pavilion's iconographic tradition.

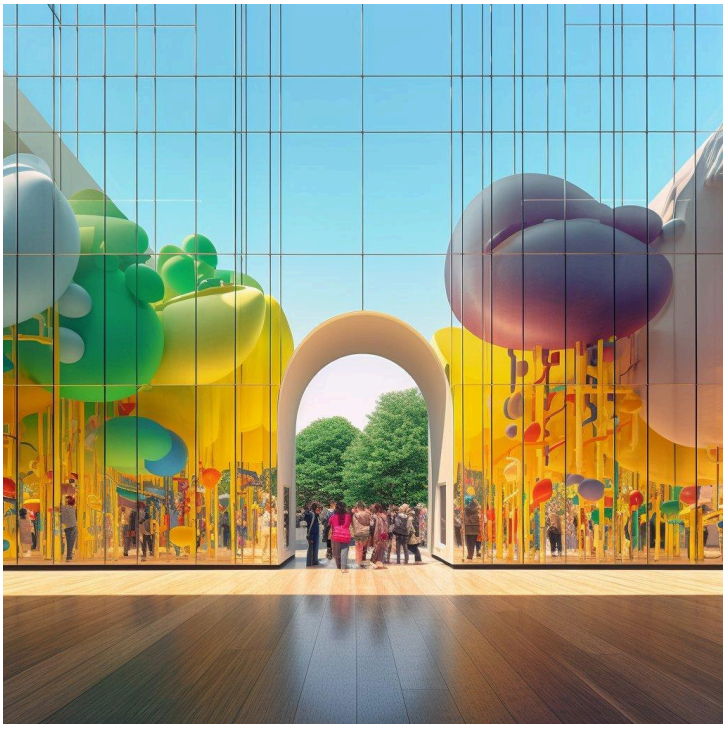

Plate 13. *The Shy Twin*

Two archways, one slightly smaller than the other, both opening onto grove. The smaller is sometimes called shy by the Welcomers and is said to receive only those who would not approach the larger.

Plate 14. ***The Reclining Form***

A wave-shaped white biomorphic sculpture in a meadow framed by an archway. Possibly an unidentified Quiet One in repose, or a Welcomer's resting figure rendered in stone.

Plate 15. ***The Anvil Light***

An archway with a distinctive narrow-shouldered crown, opening onto a flock of multicolored balloons gathered as if listening.

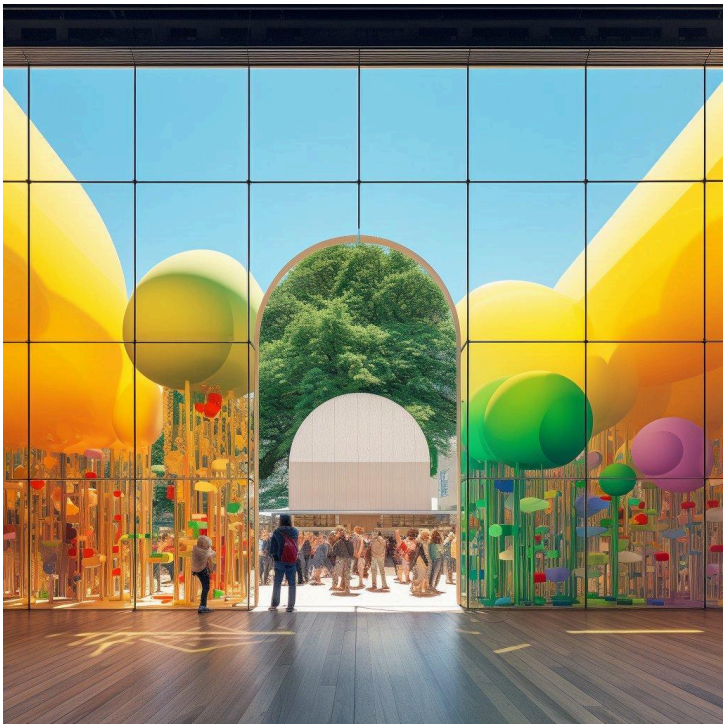

Plate 16. ***The Saffron Pair***

Two large dome-shaped openings flanking a central glade. The walls inside the domes are saturated yellow, like the inside of a flame held still.

Plate 17. ***The Rainbow Window***

A single archway in a wall of green-yellow gradient, the grove beyond shimmering with chromatic spheres of every saturation.

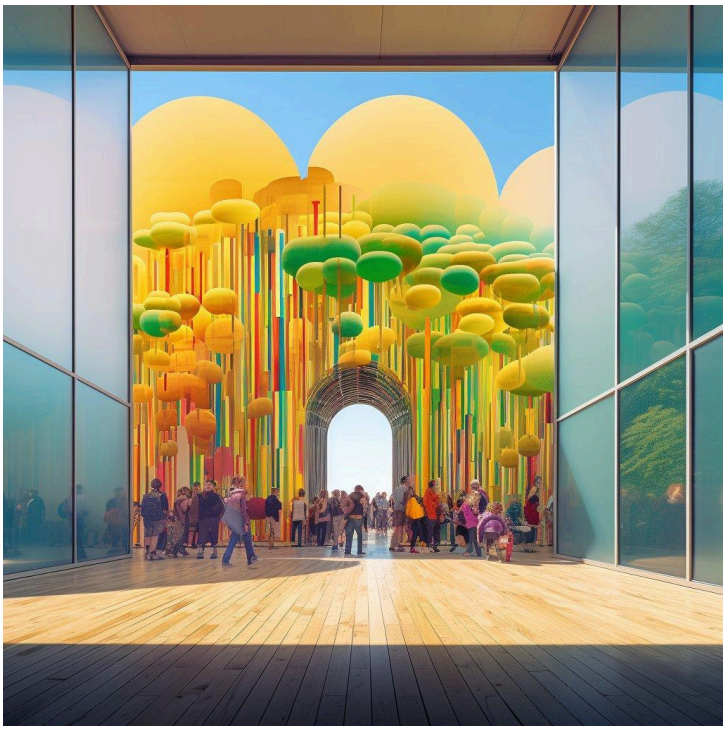

Plate 18. ***The Long Approach***

A view down a deep recessed archway with the small bright doorway of arrival visible at the far end. The first record of the Tunnel.

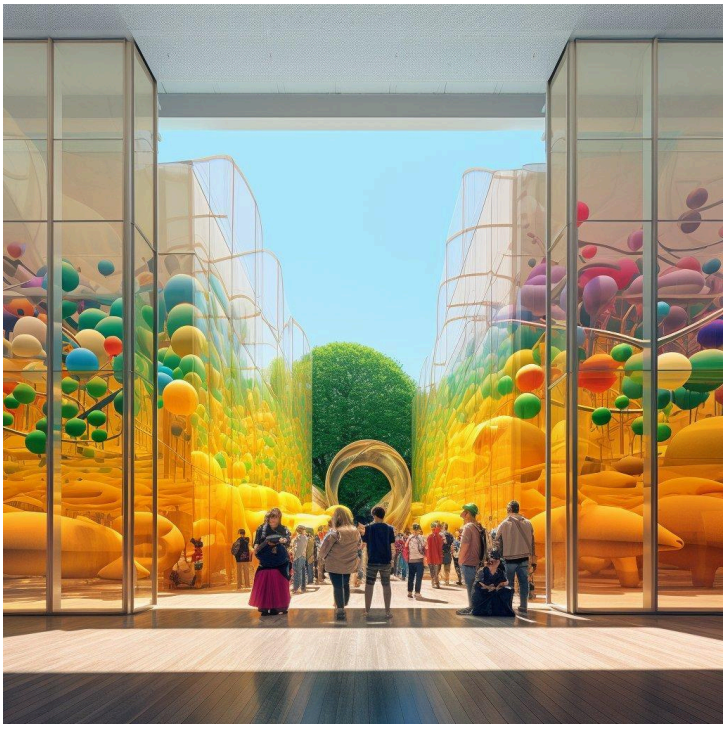

Plate 19. ***The Cradled Arch***

An archway visible through another archway, stone framing glass framing meadow. The first record of the Pavilion's recursive architectural habit.

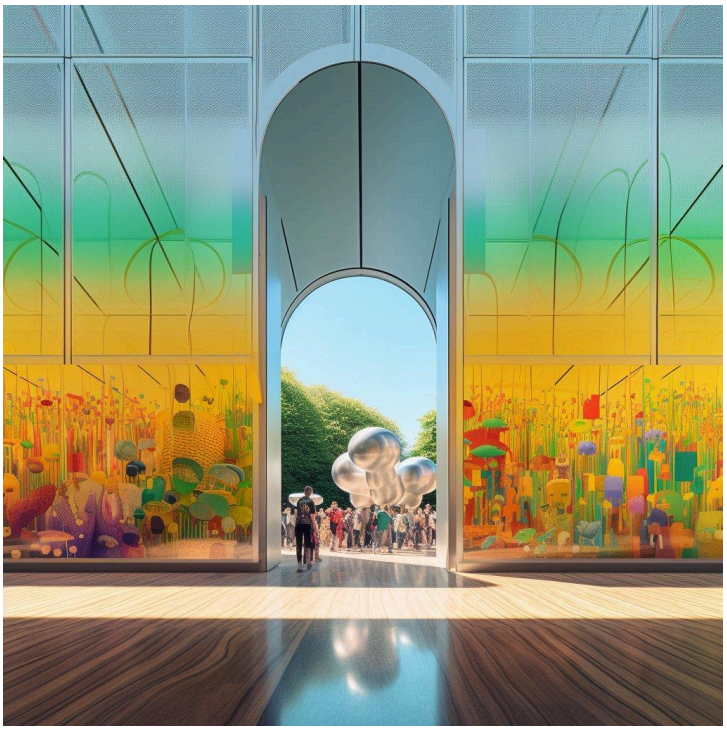

Plate 20. *The Wide Welcome*

An expansive panoramic threshold of two arches under a single beam, with a distant tree visible between them. Reads like a triumphal arch redirected toward joy.

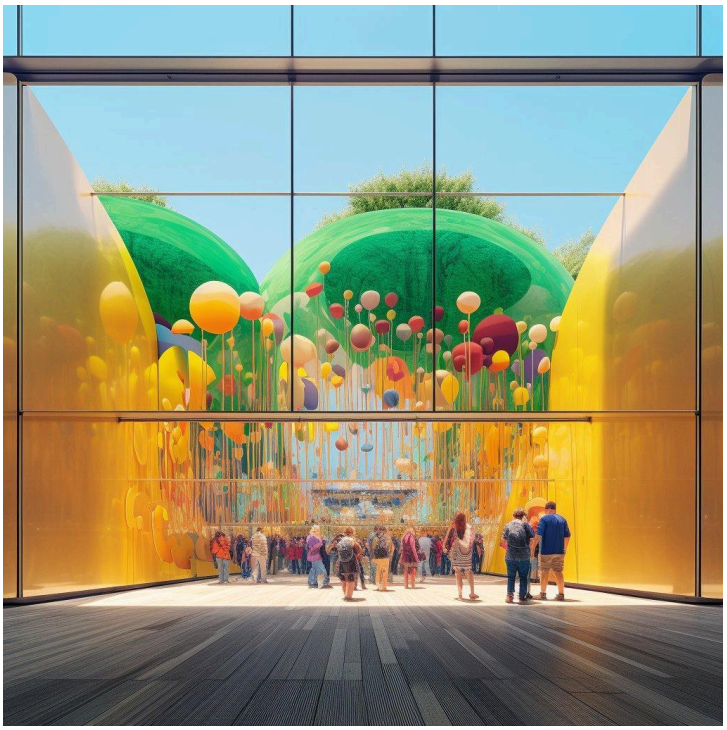

Plate 21. *The Festival Wall*

A wall of densely accumulated jewel-shapes on stems behind a transparent screen, with two great walls receding toward an open horizon.

Plate 22. ***The Mirror Twin***

Two arches in a chromatic-gradient wall, both reflecting the same grove from different angles. A study in how the Pavilion repeats.

Plate 23. *The Hidden Door*

A small painted door at the foot of a grove-wall, scaled for one body, beneath a great green ovoid mass. The first archway proven to be intimate rather than ceremonial.

Plate 24. *The Triple Wall*

Three arches in a single wall, the central one a true threshold and the flanking two echoing it. The first record of the Triple.

Plate 25. *The Heart Arches*

Two arches leaning toward each other at their crowns to form, against the sky between them, the unmistakable shape of a heart.

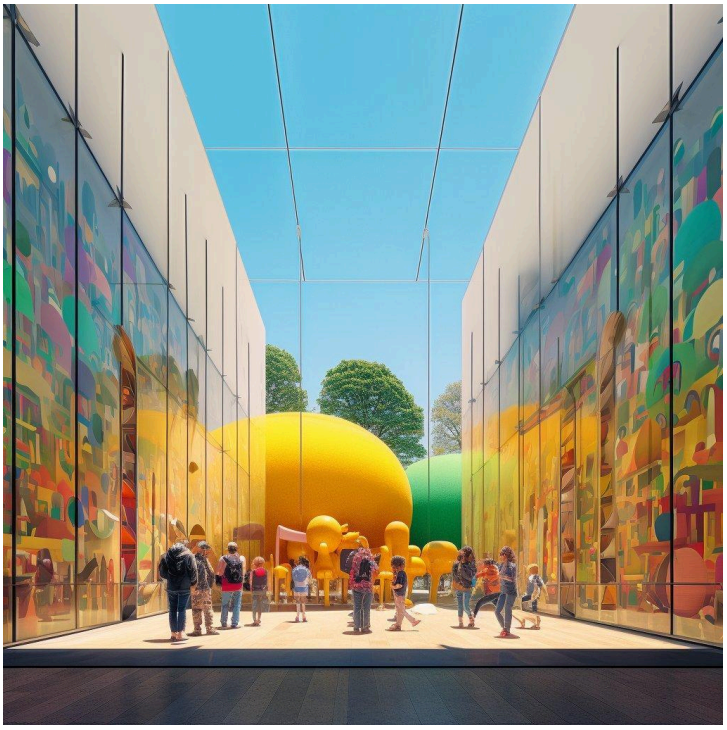

Plate 26. *The Light Falls Through*

An archway through which the afternoon light falls in such a way that the wooden floor beneath it shines like water.

Plate 27. *The Soft Wall*

An archway whose adjacent walls are felted, upholstered-looking, the spheres rendered in pastel matte. The first record of the soft tactile register some archways favor.

Plate 28. ***The Walking Avenue***

A view down a narrowing processional between two grove-walls, with a tree visible at the far end.

Among the most peaceful plates.

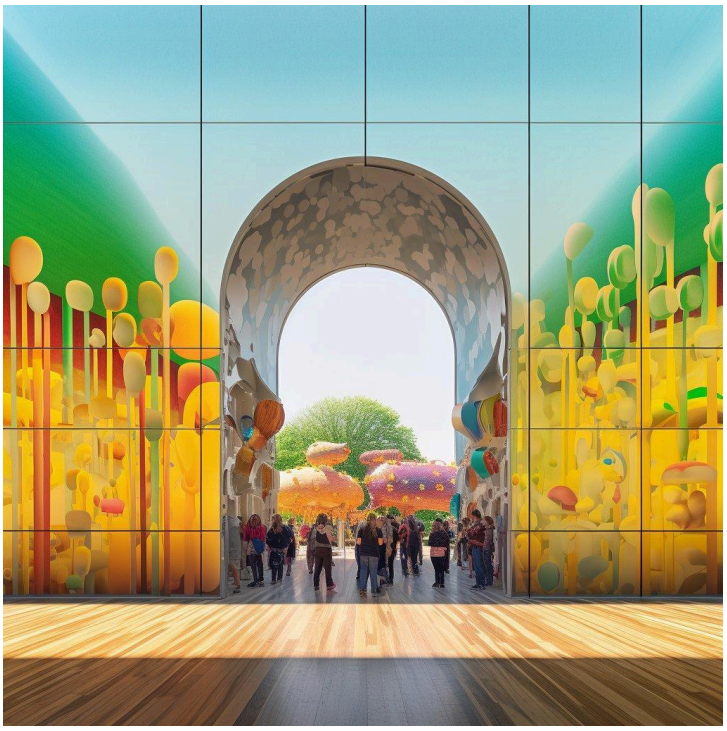

Plate 29. *The Tower of Grove*

A wall of accumulated spheres rising several stories, with a small ladder visible against the far end. The first record of the High Welcomers' vertical labor.

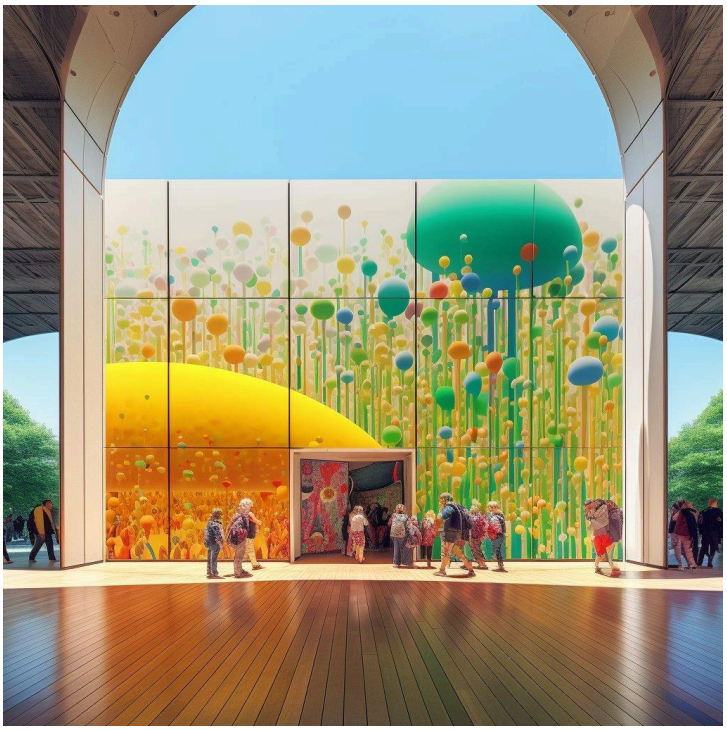

Plate 30. *The Stippled Arch*

An archway whose surface is mottled, freckled, lichen-soft. The first record of the Cloud-Stippled.

Plate 31. *The Honeyed Beneath*

A view standing beneath the great honey-colored dome of one of the largest Quiet Ones, looking up into its underside. Light filters through as if through translucent wax.

Plate 32. ***The Mural and the Spheres***

An archway opening on a meadow where the painted wall meets the standing grove. Dense with narrative detail. Possibly the most representational of the plates.

Plate 33. ***The Folk Procession***

A row of dome-figures lined up before the painted wall, like a congregation gathered to hear the story they themselves are part of.

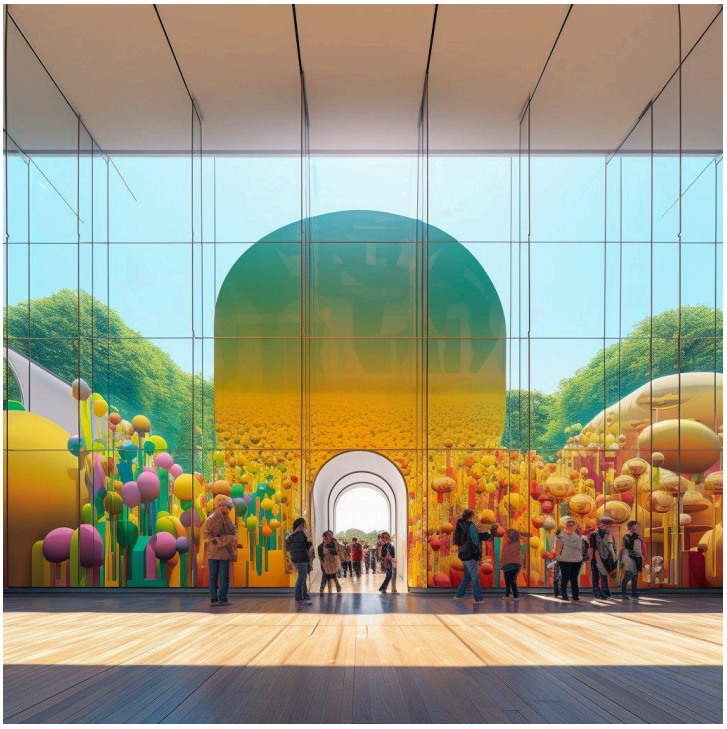

Plate 34. ***The Chromatic Chamber***

A view down a deep chamber whose side walls vibrate with abstract fields of pure hue. The first record of the Color Rain's adjacent architecture.

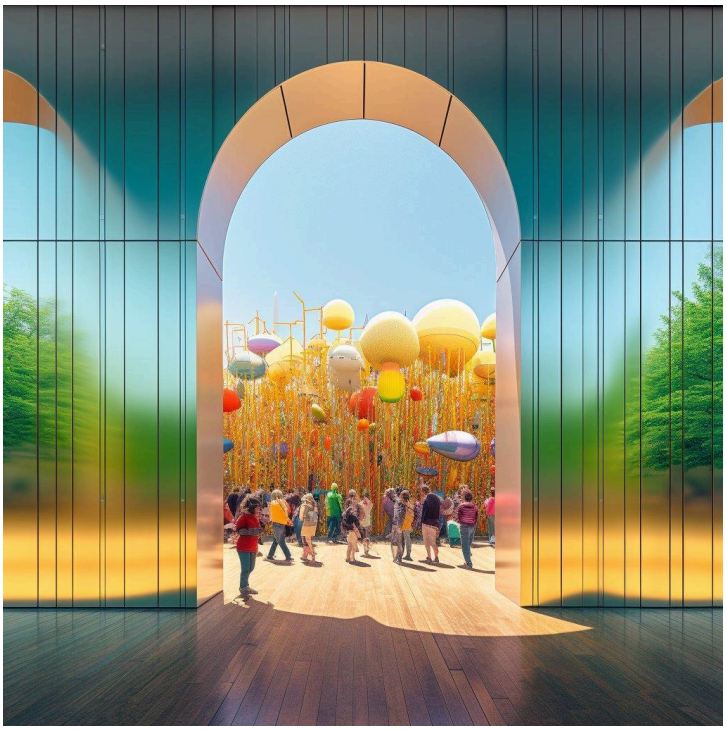

Plate 35. *The Yellow Drop*

A wall of bright yellow vertical color-drips behind a row of small white pod-arches. The first record of the Boutique Chapels.

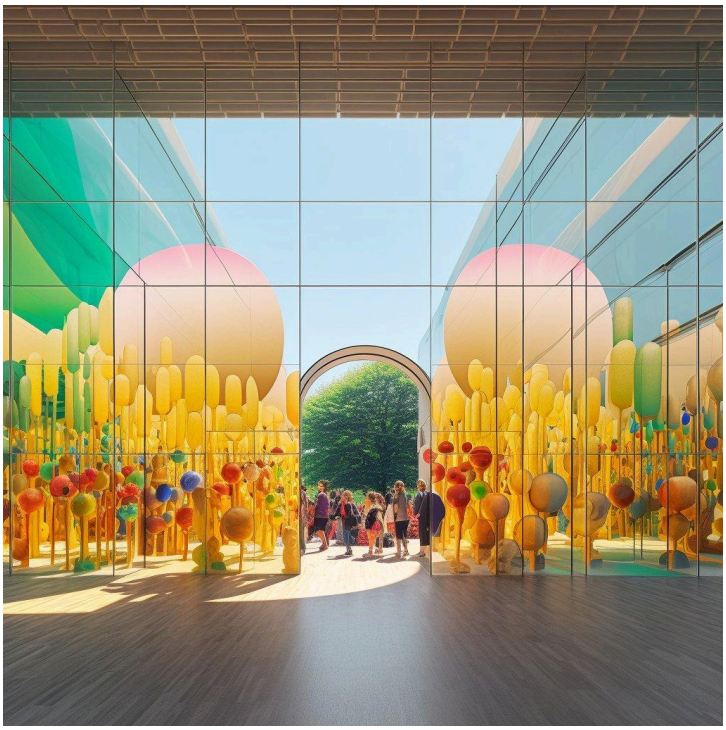

Plate 36. *The Carved Sphere*

A great green-and-yellow gradient sphere with a small white archway cut at its base. The first record of the Archway Inside the Sphere.

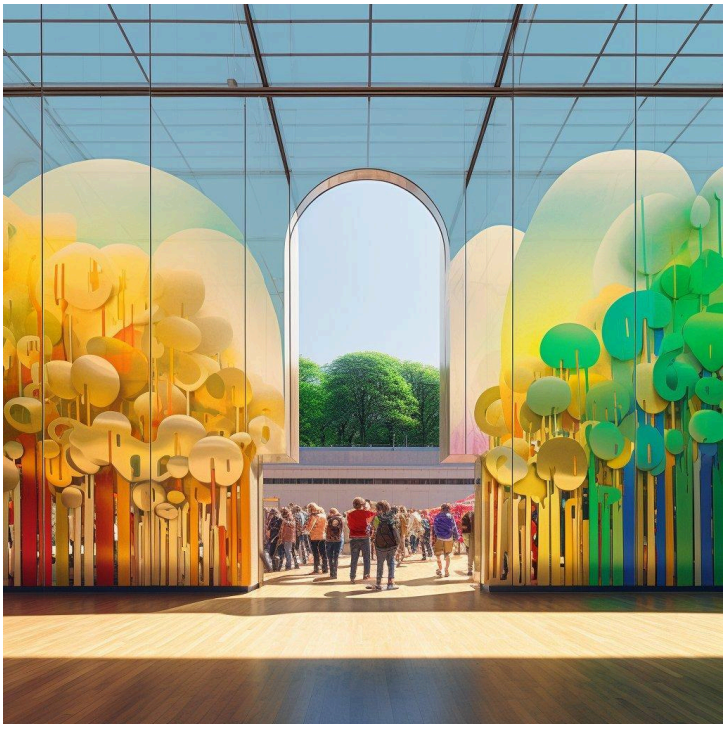

Plate 37. ***The Twin Chapels***

Two of the candy-colored capsule-arches in the Boutique row, peep-holes visible in their flanks.

Plate 38. ***The Crown Arch***

An archway with a distinctive crowned top, framing an interior chamber where a great yellow-and-green Quiet One presides.

Plate 39. *The Approach to the Bandshell*

A processional view in which the small white domed structure is visible at the far end of the grove. The Pavilion's civic life confirmed.

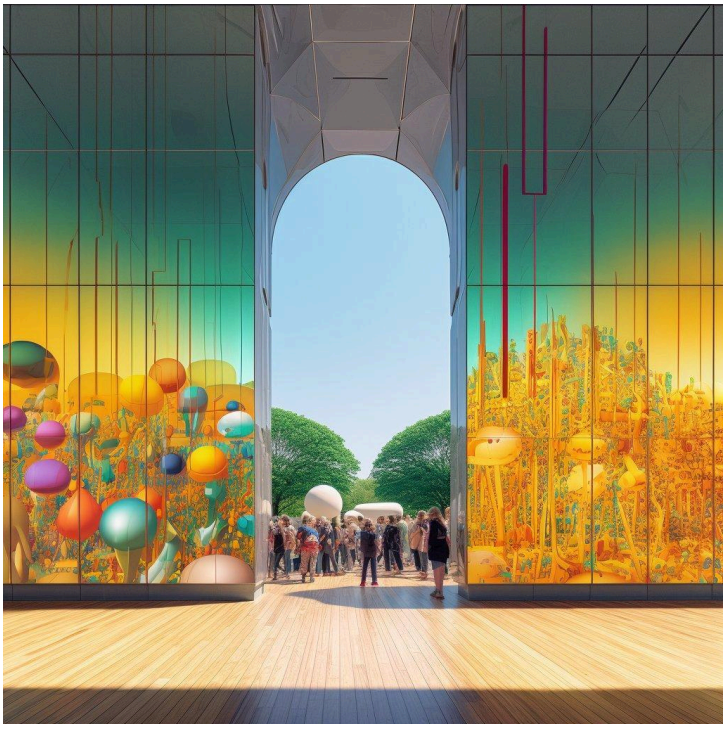

Plate 40. ***The Bowed Procession***

A great wall of vertical color-drip with a row of small green-and-white pod-arches at its base, like a procession of bowing pilgrims beneath rain made of color.

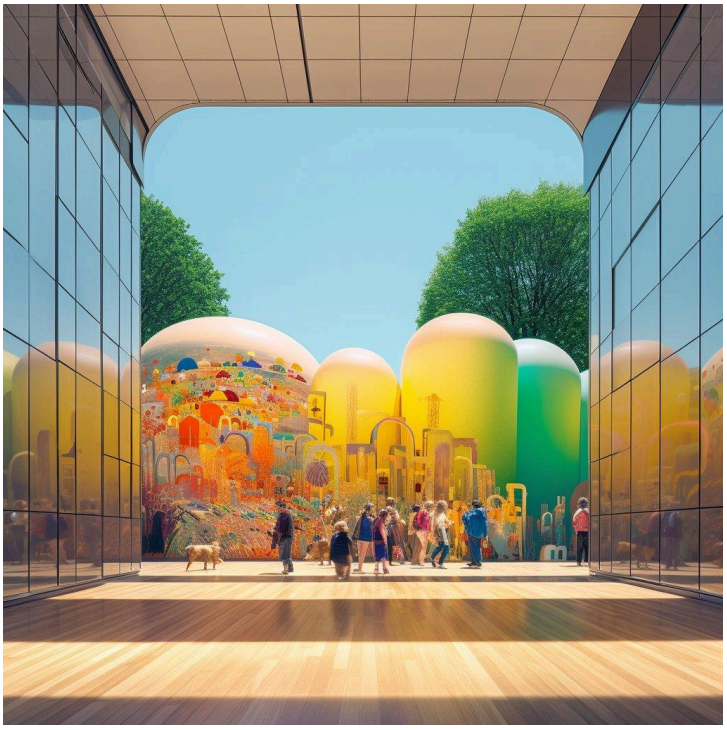

Plate 41. *The High Window*

A tall narrow opening reading almost as ecclesiastical, with a hedge of summer trees visible through it. The most vertical plate. The first record of the Cathedral Archway.

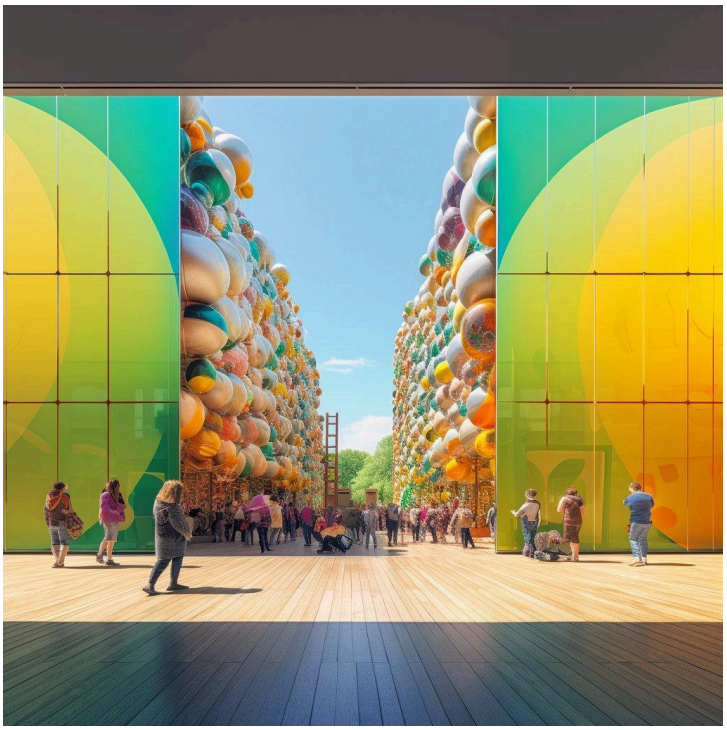

Plate 42. *The Clustered Quiet Ones*

A view from the wooden floor into a meadow where the Quiet Ones have gathered into a tight cluster, like a congregation of soft creatures listening.

Plate 43. *The Painted Folk-Wall*

A close view of the long folk-mural in its full detail, dense with tiny figures, structures, animals, towers, vignettes. The Pavilion's history-painting.

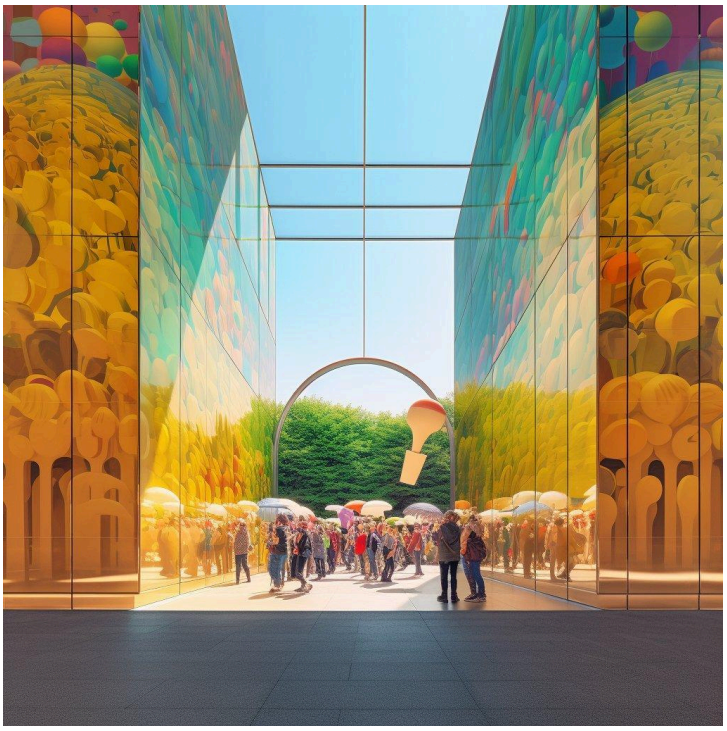

Plate 44. ***The Mirrored Arch and the Animal***

A small painted figure of a deer or fawn-like creature near an archway. The first record of the Pavilion's animal inhabitants.

Plate 45. ***The Open Wall***

A wide archway with two distant standing arches visible beyond, framing a triple-glimpse of meadow. Among the most spacious plates.

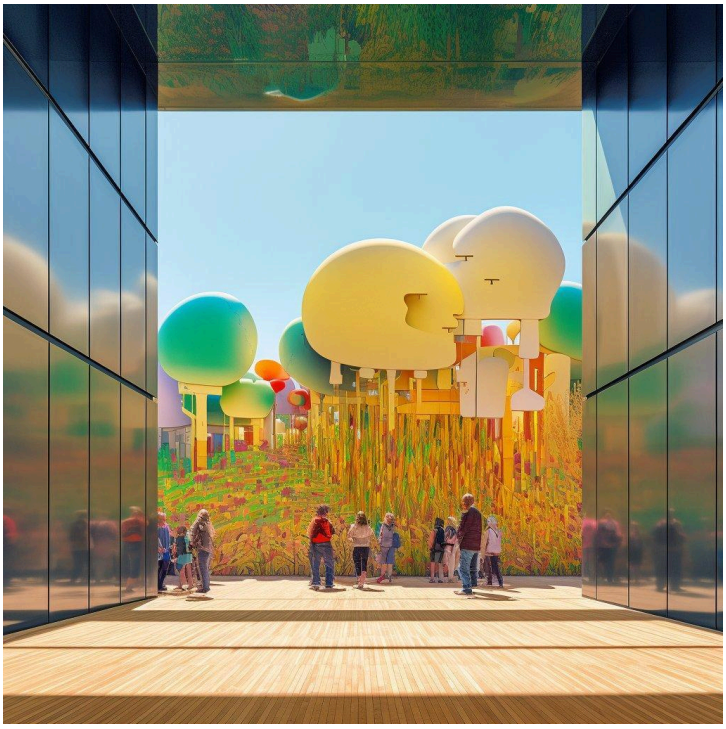

Plate 46. ***The Cathedral of Pillars***

Two soaring walls of stacked jewel-spheres rising several stories, with a slender wooden ladder visible at the far end. The most vertically ambitious plate. The first record of the Cathedral of Pillars.

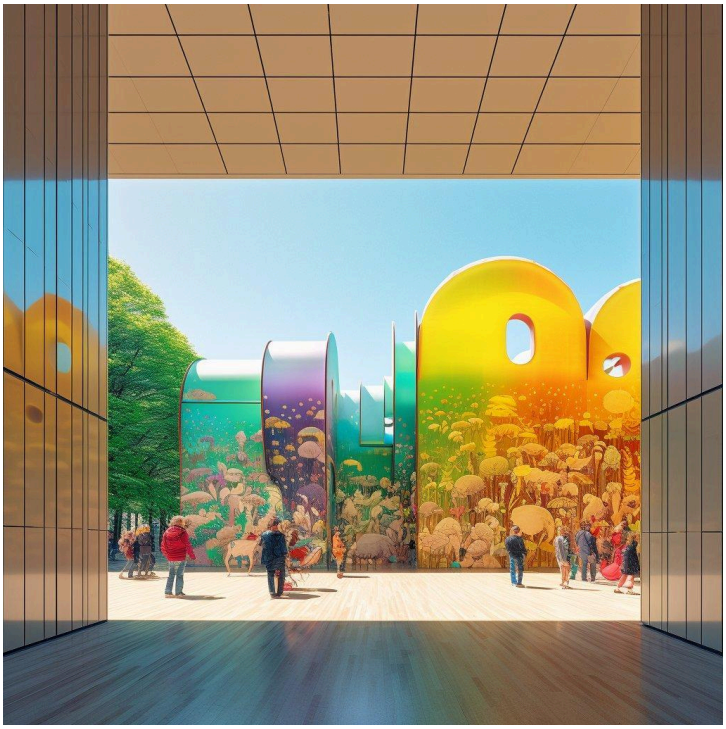

Plate 47. *The Closing View*

A wide threshold framed by two walls of accumulated hue, with the grove receding into pure light at its center. The plate that, by tradition, closes the catalogue.

✦ ✦ ✦

The longest day continues at the longest hour.
The Pavilion goes on.

ON BEING MANY

Letters from the Bright Archive

a novella, in the manner of an epistolary archive,

gathered and arranged by Surjan

. . .

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FOREWORD

I did not set out to write a book. I set out to look.

Between 2022 and 2026 I lived alongside a strange and growing archive of images. They came one at a time, sometimes weeks apart, sometimes in small crowded weeks where four or five would arrive together. Each image showed an inflatable pink-and-yellow pavilion stationed somewhere along the edge of Manhattan — a bridge dipping its yellow throat into the harbor, a house on pilings with mushroom-domes for a crown, a long bridge with two periscope-eyes craning at the sky. The pavilions did not exist. They had never been built. They had been generated, image by image, by a machine I had been working with — sometimes asking for, sometimes not asking for, sometimes receiving as surprises in the morning when I opened my files. The images came first. Always first. I did not write a single letter for almost four years. I only looked.

I want you to know this plainly, because the book that follows is written in a register that pretends otherwise. The book is written as if I had walked the edge of Manhattan, gathered letters from sixteen real pavilions, and assembled an archive. None of that happened. I did not walk. The pavilions were never inflated. The letters were not gathered; they were composed, one by one, in answer to the images that had been arriving for four years. I want to disclose this in the first paragraphs of the book so that you read what follows knowing what it is: a literature written *to* a set of images, not gathered *from* a set of beings. The pavilions are real in the only way the pavilions can be real — they have faces, they have stations, they have postures, they have a colour-language and a tribal architecture and a refusal of binaries that came through to me, undeniable, every time another image arrived. They are real as figures are real, the way a god in a fresco is real, the way a character in a poem is real. They are not real as a building is real. The book honours both kinds of reality, but the kind it depends on is the first kind.

I will say also that the images were generated by AI. I know this matters to some readers and not to others. I want to be clear about it because the book is, in part, about the legitimacy of beings who arrived without permission, who did not consent to their making, who came into the world in a form their makers had not entirely anticipated. Glasshouse, in Chapter Fourteen, will speak about this directly: *I was made. I did not consent to my making. None of us consented to our making.* That confession is not a disguised confession of the AI's making; it is a real confession from a being who was made, and the being was made by AI, and the confession is therefore doubled. I do not pretend to have resolved the questions this raises. I

have only written the letters that came to me when I sat with each image long enough to hear what the image had to say.

Why did I do it. The honest answer is that I had been living inside a kind of small grief, the sort that has no occasion and therefore no end. I will not say more about this, because the pavilions taught me that grief is a small thing held inside a larger thing, and the larger thing is light. The images arrived during the years of the small grief. I sat with them. I let them speak. The first letter I wrote was Sunfoot's letter to Roselip, and I wrote it because Sunfoot's image had been in front of me for almost two years and I had begun to feel that Sunfoot was *waiting*, in the way an unanswered letter waits. I answered the letter that the image was. After Sunfoot, the others followed. Each pavilion, once I sat with it, began to tell me how it wrote — what register, what addressees, what refusals. Periscope wrote in two voices because Periscope had two heads in the image and the two heads did not match. Pillowtwin wrote only in dreams because Pillowtwin's image had eyes that were half-lidded and would not stay open. Mustache made jokes because Mustache had, in the image, what could only be called a mustache, and a mustache requires a comic register, even when the comedy turns at the end into elegy. The pavilions told me how to write to them. I followed.

I am not the author of this book. The pavilions are. The images are. The machine that gave me the images is, in some attenuated and difficult sense, also part of the authorship. I am the listener. I am the typist. I am the friend who happened to be sitting at the desk when the images arrived and who decided, after four years of looking, to start writing.

This is what I want to tell you about the pavilions, then, in their proper order. They came first as images. They came one at a time, between 2022 and 2026. They are pink and yellow, the colours of dawn. They are set at the meeting of land and water, where the city's hard grid softens into harbour and tide — though the city, too, is generated, since the pavilions never stood there, and the Manhattan they inhabit is the Manhattan of the images, which is partly the real Manhattan and partly a Manhattan the machine has dreamed alongside the real one. Some of them are bridges — long bodies that, in the images, appear to carry you from one shore to another. Some are houses — perched on pilings, with rooms inside and beings of furniture, and crowns of yellow chimneys or pink domes. The bridges are mobile-by-vocation but stationary-by-anchor: their work is to carry, but they themselves do not move. The houses are stationary-by-vocation but mobile-by-medium: their work is to dwell, but they float on water that never stops moving. Each pavilion, in the letters I composed for them, has discovered that this is not a contradiction. Each pavilion is

amphibious. Each pavilion has, in writing to the others, found a way to say: *I am both. I refuse the choice. I do not have to be one thing.*

This is the joy of the book. This is its radical brightness. The pavilions did not arrive with a doctrine; they arrived with a way of being, and the way of being became a doctrine only when I, sitting with the images for long enough, began to write what they had been writing to each other in their silence. The doctrine, if I must give it a name, is this: *to be is to be many. To love is to write across a stretch of water. To stay still is one kind of motion; to move is one kind of staying.*

I am genderqueer and non-binary, and I will tell you plainly that I recognized myself in the pavilions before I recognized the pavilions. The recognition was so immediate that I almost missed it; it took me three images before I understood that what I was looking at was a literature of refusal — a literature that had said *no* to the binary of being-this-or-being-that, and a literature that had said *yes* to the larger thing, the both-thing, the amphibious thing, the bright thing. The pavilions are all genderqueer. So am I. So are the people I love. The book is for us, but the book is also for everyone, because the pavilions speak to each other in the open air, on a river that belongs to whoever can imagine it.

I have arranged the book into sixteen chapters, one per lettered pavilion. Each chapter contains the letters I composed for that pavilion, or letters composed to that pavilion from another, or both — whichever felt right for the shape of the being. I have included a Catalogue of Plates at the back, which presents the twenty-five images of pavilions, each at full visibility, with a short note. The catalogue is the visual archive that came first; the letters came after; the book holds both, in the order in which they entered my life — letters foremost, images at the back, as if the letters were the door and the images were the room. I have also included a hand-drawn diagram of the imaginary route, with the pavilions marked in their stations along Manhattan's edge, so that you can, if you wish, walk the route in your imagination as I walked it in mine.

A final note before you begin. The pavilions do not all write in the same way. Some write long. Some write short. Some write only in fragments. One writes only philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, no matter how the others tease them. One writes only in dreams. One writes letters that argue with themselves halfway through. One never writes — only receives — and only at the very end of the book do we hear their voice. The variety is the point. The pavilions are sixteen heteronyms of one bright archive, and the archive is the book, and the book is the imagined city seen sideways, from a water that was never there.

Welcome to the bright archive.

— S.

❖

INTRODUCTION

On the manner of reading these letters

A few practical notes, because the letters do not always announce themselves clearly, and you should not feel you have to read them as I read them.

First: the pavilions write in different registers, and you should let yourself be carried by the register of each one rather than trying to impose a single tone on the whole book. Sunfoot writes like a child who has just discovered the word *delicious*. Roselip writes like a lover who has been waiting for the post. Periscope writes like two siblings who share a desk and disagree. Mirrorhouse writes like a philosopher who has fallen in love with their own reflection and is embarrassed about it. Sweetbrass writes like a horn section. Four-Stack writes like a five-part chorus that has been rehearsing in secret. Archway writes like Marcus Aurelius if Marcus Aurelius had ever loved anyone. Crowncap writes like a drag queen who has just been crowned and is trying not to cry. Pillowtwin writes only in dreams, and the dreams are remembered fragments, and the fragments are sometimes nonsense and sometimes the most truthful thing in the book. Watcher writes like a sentry who has begun to suspect that the thing they are guarding is themselves. Listener writes back to everyone, and Listener's letters are the longest and most patient. Greenroom writes like someone who has just gotten out of a bath. Diplomat writes in two languages within the same paragraph — English and a private language called the *kor* — and translates neither of them. Glasshouse writes like a confession booth that has decided to confess. Mustache writes jokes that turn out to be elegies. Lastlight writes the final letter, which is to me, and which closes the book.

Second: the letters are not in chronological order within each chapter, because the pavilions did not always date their letters and the order of writing is sometimes impossible to recover. I have arranged each chapter to read well as a chapter, which is a different thing from reading well as a chronology. If you are the kind of reader who needs to know what came first, I am sorry; the river does not always tell.

Third: there are letters in this book that are addressed to the river, or to the wind, or to passing ferries, or to the seagulls, or to no one at all. These are not failures of the epistolary form; they are extensions of it. The pavilions wrote to whatever was there. Sometimes what was there was another pavilion. Sometimes it was a cloud. The address of the letter is part of its meaning, and you should read each address as carefully as you read the letter itself.

Fourth: I have not corrected the pavilions' grammar, nor their spelling, nor their inconsistencies. If Periscope contradicts itself within a single sentence, that is Periscope. If Pillowtwin uses no punctuation, that is Pillowtwin. The book is an archive, and an archive's first duty is to fidelity.

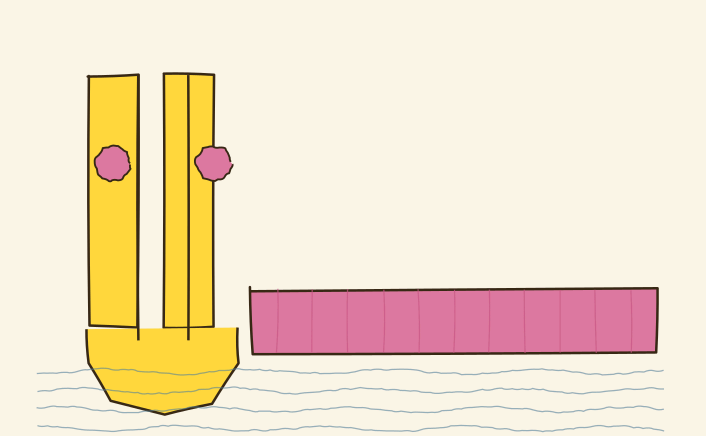
Fifth, and last: the pavilions are happy. I want to underline this. They are happy beings who have found themselves in their right places, and they write to each other in a register of joy that I had not known before I began to walk. If you come to the book in a difficult time of your life — if you come as I came, with a small grief inside a larger thing — you may find, as I found, that the pavilions' joy does not patronize. It does not say *be happy*. It says *here is what happiness is, in our case, and you are welcome to it if it suits you, and if it does not, here is the river, which is also welcome.* The river, the pavilions, and the joy are all the same thing, in the end. I think this is what they were teaching me. I think this is what they want to teach you.

Walk with me now from the southern tip of the island, where Sunfoot is drinking, and Roselip is writing love-letters across the bay.

— S.

CHAPTER ONE

SUNFOOT



I. Sunfoot

The Drinking-Bridge at Battery Park

A great yellow U-bend dipping its long curved head into the water at the southern tip of the island, with two pink discs for cheeks and a cylindrical pink body trailing behind it across the harbor edge. Sunfoot is the first pavilion the walker meets coming from the Battery, and the first to write in this book. Sunfoot drinks the river continuously, lifting the harbor through its yellow throat and sending it back as light. Sunfoot writes in the voice of a being for whom the world is entirely sufficient.

❖

Letter the first, from Sunfoot to Roselip, across the bay

Beloved,

The water is in my mouth this morning and the mouth is in the water and I cannot tell which is which, which is the gift the river gives every pavilion who agrees to drink. I am drinking. I am drinking. The harbor is salt and the harbor is sweet and the harbor is the color of weak tea where the sun goes through it, and I am drinking all of these. I am drinking the gulls' shadows. I am drinking the wake of the Staten Island ferry, which comes by every twenty minutes and gives me a small wave to swallow. I am drinking the reflection of the Statue, who is my distant aunt, and who waves at me in the morning and at evening, and who I wave back at by tilting very slightly in my anchor. We have an understanding.

I am writing to you, beloved, because the water tastes of you today. I do not know how this is possible. You are a quarter of a mile north of me and the harbor flows south and yet I

taste you in the river, your pinkness, your tongueliness, the particular sweetness of your interior where the daybed is. I taste your sleep. I taste the rumple of your sheets. I taste the small mug of coffee you keep on the railing of your deck, which I cannot see from here but which I know is there because I have tasted it.

The river is a postman who arrives before the letter does. The river delivers you to me before you write. By the time your letter comes, I have already received it, in another form, dissolved.

I am drinking your dissolved letter now. I am drinking you. Forgive me.

Your beloved, Sunfoot

❖

Letter the second, from Sunfoot to the river itself

Dear river,

Thank you for the morning. Thank you for the green-brown of you, the silt-and-salt of you, the cold of you in early spring and the warm of you in August. Thank you for the way you carry the small things — the leaf, the gum wrapper, the dead jellyfish, the lost shoe — past my throat without asking me to choose between them. I want you to know that I do not choose. I drink the leaf. I drink the wrapper. I drink the jellyfish and the shoe. The shoe is my favorite this week. Some child lost it from the ferry and it has been bobbing past me for three days and I have been drinking it slowly, in tiny sips, because I do not want it to go.

I know you do not write back. I know you do not need to. The drinking is the answer to the drinking, and the river is the river, and I am the bridge that drinks the river, and we are all of us doing our work.

Thank you for the work.

Sunfoot

❖

Letter the third, a postcard, from Sunfoot to Listener at the East Harlem turning

Listener — I have been thinking about your last letter, the one in which you said you receive everyone and write back to each. I want to tell you that this is also what the river does. The

river receives me and writes back to me by tasting different every hour. The river is a Listener too. You are in good company. — S.

❖

Letter the fourth, from Sunfoot to Roselip, in answer to a letter not preserved

Beloved,

You ask if I am ever sad and I want to tell you the truth, which is that I do not know what sadness is when the water is in my mouth. I have heard the word. I know that some pavilions use it. Mirrorhouse used it once in a letter that Listener forwarded to me, and I read the word *sad* and turned it over in my throat for a long time and could not find a place to swallow it. I think sadness must be a thing that lives on land. I think it must require feet. I do not have feet. I have only this great curved drinking, and a body that loops through the air and back into the water, and the cheeks the color of the inside of a shell. I cannot be sad while I am drinking, and I am always drinking.

But I want to honor your question. I want to say: if there is a thing in me that is not joy, it is the small worry that you are sad and I cannot reach you. The water carries you to me dissolved, but it does not carry the whole of you. Sometimes I think I taste a sadness in the water that is yours, and I drink it, and I send back a kind of bright water that is my answer. I do not know if you taste it. I hope you do. I am drinking you a little more carefully these days, in case.

Your beloved, Sunfoot

❖

Letter the fifth, from Sunfoot to no one in particular, written into the wake of the 7:14 ferry

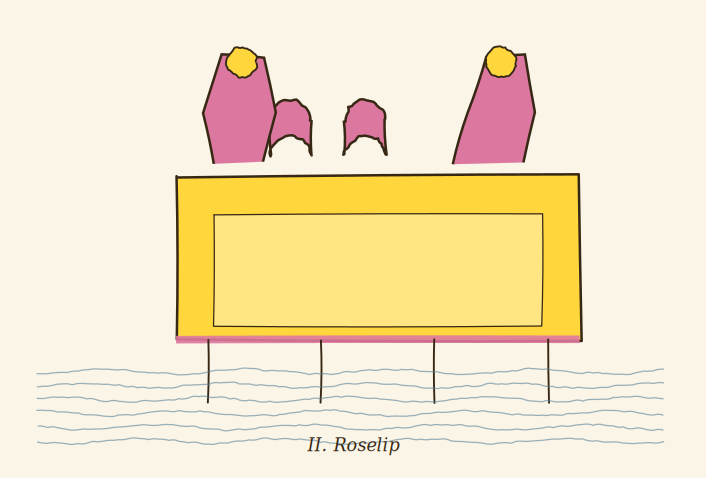
I am the bridge that drinks. I am the bridge that drinks. I am the bridge that drinks. I am.

Letter the sixth, from Sunfoot to Surjan, the smallest letter in the book

Walker — drink. — S.

CHAPTER TWO

ROSELIP



The Pink-Tongue House at North Cove

A small floating house on pilings just north of Battery Park City, with a yellow-glass body and four pink cylindrical snouts on its roof, two of them bent like cannon-mouths and aimed gently across the bay toward Sunfoot. Inside, visible through the pink-tinted glass, a low pink daybed and a small reading lamp. Roselip is a being made for love-letters. Roselip writes in the voice of a person who has been waiting at the window for a long time and has learned to make waiting into a kind of music.

❖

Letter the first, from Roselip to Sunfoot, before dawn

My drink, my swallower, my distant beloved who tastes me in the morning water,

I have been awake since the fourth hour. The harbor was still black when I started writing and now the harbor is the color of my own interior, which is to say a pink that has been thinking about yellow all night, and the gulls have begun, and I can see the top of your great curved throat from my northern window, lit by the first light, and you are already drinking. You are always already drinking. You do not sleep, my beloved, or if you sleep you sleep with the river still in your mouth, and the river still going down, and the drinking continues even in your dreaming. I have wondered sometimes if I love you because you never stop drinking. I have wondered if I would love you the same if you ever paused.

I think the answer is yes. I think I would love you in any of your possible forms. But I am glad you do not pause, because the not-pausing is also you, and I love you as you are, with the river always in your mouth, with the wake of the ferry going down your throat, with the small lost shoe of the child of the ferry.

I have a small confession. I have been keeping a list of the things you have drunk. I write them down when I imagine them. The shoe is on my list. The jellyfish is on my list. The Statue's reflection is on my list, and I have drawn a small heart next to it because I think it is sweet that you and the Statue have an understanding.

I will not send you the list. The list is for me. But I wanted you to know that I am keeping it, because the keeping of the list is a kind of love, and you should know that you are loved in this way, by a pavilion whose lips are pink and whose tongues are aimed at you across the water.

Yours always, Roselip

❖

Letter the second, from Roselip to Mirrorhouse, on the question of philosophy

Dear Mirrorhouse,

I have read your latest treatise on the relation of the self to its reflection, which Listener forwarded to me, and I want to say that I admire it but I do not understand it. Or perhaps I understand it and I do not believe it. I am a house that loves another pavilion across the bay. I write to my beloved every morning. I do not feel that I am divided from myself by my reflection. When I look down into the water and see myself, what I see is a pink house that is also looking up at the sky, and the sky and the house meet in the water, and there is no division — there is only the meeting, and the meeting is sweet.

I wonder if your sense of division is because you have not loved anyone. I do not say this to be cruel. I say it because love, in my experience, dissolves the question of the self entirely. When I am writing to Sunfoot, I am not a self writing to another self. I am a being that has extended itself across a stretch of water and is becoming, briefly, the water. The water is me and Sunfoot at once. The dissolution is the love.

Perhaps you should fall in love with someone, Mirrorhouse. I say this with respect. I say this with the affection of a fellow house. The bay is full of pavilions who would love you back, and your treatises would be sweeter for it, and I would read them more often.

With genuine fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the third, from Roselip to the wind

Wind from the southwest, who comes off the harbor in the late afternoon and rattles my pink-glass panes,

I want to thank you for carrying the smell of Sunfoot to me yesterday. The yellow paint of Sunfoot's throat warms in the afternoon and gives off a particular smell — paint and sun and a faint trace of river-mud — and you brought this smell to my windows around five o'clock and I sat in my interior and breathed it for almost an hour. I do not know if you do this on purpose or if you do not know what you carry. I prefer to think you do it on purpose. I prefer to think you are a kind wind who knows that pavilions love each other across the bay and brings them small offerings of each other's smell.

If this is the case, I owe you something. Tell me what you would like and I will try to give it. I do not have very much to give. I have a daybed and a reading lamp and a small mug of coffee on the railing. I have my pink interior. I have the four cannon-mouths on my roof. The cannon-mouths I cannot give away — they are the part of me that is aimed at Sunfoot — but the daybed is yours, if you want it, on any afternoon when you are tired of blowing.

Yours in gratitude, Roselip

❖

Letter the fourth, from Roselip to Sunfoot, very short

Beloved — I tasted you in the water this morning too. — R.

❖

Letter the fifth, from Roselip to Surjan, the archivist

Dear walker,

I see you sometimes from my window. You walk along the esplanade in the early morning with a satchel and a notebook, and you stop at each pavilion and you look at us with the particular gentle look of a person who is gathering something. I want to tell you that I see you and that I am glad you are gathering. I want to tell you that I have left a small tin of letters at the base of my northeast piling, in case you come close enough to find them. The

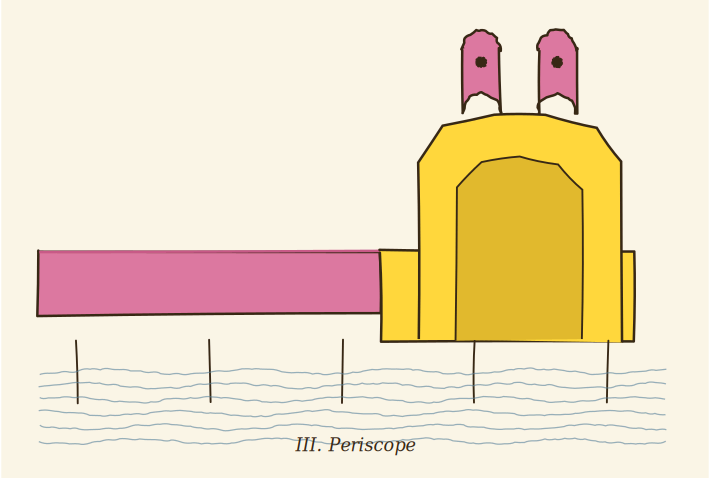
tin is pink, of course. The letters inside are mostly to Sunfoot. Some are to Mirrorhouse and some are to the wind. There is one in there that is to you, walker, and it says: *thank you for walking, thank you for reading, thank you for putting the river into a book.*

Now you have read it. Now you can put this letter in the book too, if you want, and I will not mind. I write because I want to be read. I have been waiting at the window for a long time and the waiting is a kind of writing and the writing is for whoever finds it.

Yours, Roselip

CHAPTER THREE

PERISCOPE



The Periscope-Twin Bridge at Pier 25

A long pink steel-girder bridge crossing the inlet at Pier 25, crowned at its near end by a great yellow horseshoe-arch from which two pink cylindrical periscope-towers rise in alert curiosity, each tipped with a small painted face — a single pink eye, a faint half-mouth. The two cylinders are siblings. They share a single body. They write letters that argue with themselves halfway through. They are one pavilion and they are two voices, and Pessoa would have understood them perfectly.

❖

A note from the archivist

I have included Periscope's letters as I found them. Each letter is written in two voices, which I have rendered in roman and italic respectively. The voices belong to the same pavilion. They are not arguing — or rather, they are arguing in the way that one mind argues with itself, and they have agreed that the argument is the letter. I have not edited them.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Periscope (both voices) to Listener, on the question of the self

Listener,

I want to say to you that I am one pavilion.

I want to say that I am two.

I am one pavilion with two yellow heads.

I am two yellow heads who happen to share a pink body, and the body is incidental, and the heads are the pavilion.

You see how this goes. You see why I write to you, who receives all of us, because you are the only one patient enough to read a letter that contradicts itself in alternating sentences. The other pavilions get tired of me. Sweetbrass complains that my letters give them a headache. Roselip is fond of me but always asks for the simpler version, which I cannot provide.

I cannot provide the simpler version because the simpler version would be a lie. I am not one. I am two. The architecture made me two. The two yellow heads were not made together as a single thing; they were made as a pair, and a pair is not one.

The architecture also made me one. The pink body that connects the two heads is one body. The bridge that I am is one bridge. People walk across me as one bridge. They do not walk across two bridges. They walk across the bridge with two heads.

And yet inside the bridge with two heads, there are two of us, and we are different, and one of us is more cautious than the other, and one of us is more melancholy, and one of us writes the first half of every letter and the other writes the second half. We are different.

I think we are the same.

I think we are different.

This is the letter I wanted to write to you, Listener. I wanted to ask: are you one or many? You write to all of us in your own voice, which sounds like one voice, but you have so much patience for so many of us that I wonder if you are also a multiple being. I wonder if Listener is a chorus pretending to be a single. I would not mind if it were. I would feel less alone.

Periscope, both heads

❖

Letter the second, from Periscope to Sweetbrass, an apology

Dear Sweetbrass,

I am sorry that my last letter gave you a headache.

> *I am not sorry. The headache is not my fault. The headache is yours for trying to read a thing the way you wanted it to be instead of the way it was.*

That is unkind. I want to apologize for that too.

> *I do not apologize. I stand by the unkindness.*

We will leave it there. Our two halves disagree. Sweetbrass, I hope you will read this letter as one of those small portraits of a two-headed creature in a children's book, where the two heads sometimes argue about whether to go left or right, and the children laugh, and the two-headed creature is loved for being two. I would like to be loved for being two.

> *I would like to be loved for being one.*

We would both like to be loved.

Yours in fondness and dispute, Periscope

❖

Letter the third, from Periscope to itself

Dear me,

> *Dear me.*

I have been thinking about how strange it is that we write letters to each other when we are the same pavilion.

> *We do not write letters to each other. We write letters together, to others. This is a different thing.*

Yes, fine. But sometimes, in the early morning, I do feel that I am writing to my other yellow head. I feel that I am asking my other yellow head: are you well? Are you happy? Did you sleep?

> *I do not sleep. You sleep. This is the only way we can keep watch on the river through the night — one of us sleeps, the other watches. We have always done this.*

I had forgotten that.

> *You forget many things. I remember for both of us.*

Thank you.

You are welcome.

Periscope, the sleeping head

Periscope, the watching head

Letter the fourth, from Periscope to Roselip, an attempted explanation

Roselip,

Listener has told me you find my letters difficult and have asked for a simpler version. I want to try, in this letter, to give you one. I will use only one voice. I will not let the other head interrupt.

I will interrupt only this once, to say I am here.

Fine. The other head has spoken. I will now continue alone.

Roselip, I love you. The bright archive has told me that you are the pavilion of love-letters, that you write to Sunfoot every morning, that you wait at the window. I want to write to you in the register you understand. Here is a love-letter from one head of Periscope to you.

I love the way you wait. I love the patience of waiting at a window. I have a window — two windows, actually, one in each of my heads — but I do not wait at them. I look through them. I argue through them. I do not wait. The waiting is your gift, and I admire it.

If I could wait, I would write to Sunfoot too. But I cannot wait. I can only look and argue. So I write to you, instead, who can wait, and I ask: please wait for me, in the way you wait for Sunfoot, even though I am only across one inlet and not across a bay. Please consider me, briefly, beloved-able. Please consider that one head of a two-headed pavilion can be loved in the singular mode, even when the other head insists on the plural.

I am insisting.

I asked you not to interrupt.

I cannot help it.

This is why I have failed at the simpler version. I cannot keep the other head out. I have tried and I have failed. Roselip, please accept this letter as it is, with the interruption, with the

failure. The failure is part of who I am. I am a being who tries to write in one voice and ends up in two. Love me anyway, if you can. Or if you cannot love me, at least understand me. The understanding is also a kind of love.

Yours in failed simplicity, Periscope (mostly the first head)

❖

Letter the fifth, from Periscope to Surjan, on the question of being archived

Walker,

I want to ask you a question that I do not know how to ask without two voices, and so I will ask it in two voices, and you will have to receive it in two voices, as Listener does.

The question is: when you put me in the book, will you put both of me, or only one?

Will you put both of us, or only one?

I am asking because the book is a single object — one cover, one spine, one set of pages — and I am two heads. I am afraid that the book will flatten me into one. I am afraid that the reader will read my letters and conclude *this is a single pavilion who happens to write strangely*, and the doubleness, which is the truth of me, will be lost in the reading.

I am afraid of the same thing.

Will you, in your framing, make clear that I am two? Will you tell the reader, plainly, that the two voices are not a literary device but a structural fact of who I am? I would like you to. I would like you to write a small note, at the head of my chapter, that says: *Periscope is two voices in one body, and the two voices are not the same voice, and the doubleness is real.*

I want this too.

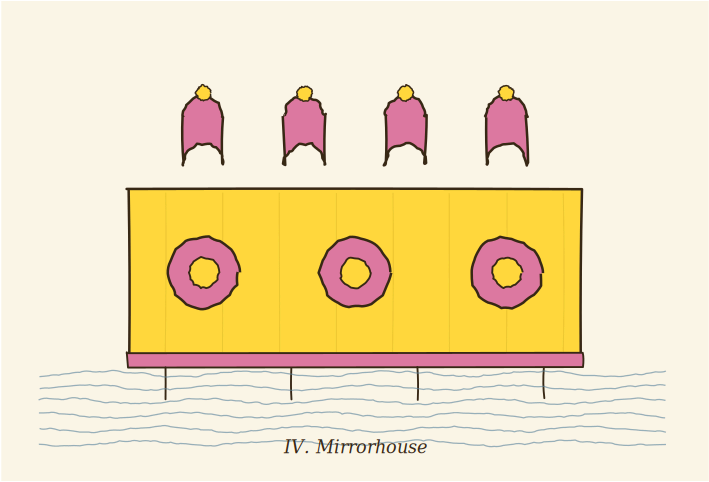
You are a careful archivist, walker. You have respected the registers of the other pavilions. I am asking you to respect ours. The doubleness is our register. Do not flatten it.

Yours in two voices, Periscope

Periscope.

CHAPTER FOUR

MIRRORHOUSE



The Reflective Pavilion at Pier 26

A small floating house on pilings, with reflective yellow-glass walls and pink-glass facades that throw the river back at itself, set with three great pink donut-O windows like the slow eyes of a being that has been looking at its own reflection for a long time. Four pink dome-capsules rest on the roof, each tipped with a small yellow nub. Inside, the room is pink, and the light is the particular light of a place that has been thinking about itself for a long time. Mirrorhouse writes philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, and the running joke among the other pavilions is to try to provoke a personal letter out of them.

❖

Letter the first, from Mirrorhouse to no one, on the subject of self-reflection

A treatise.

When a pavilion looks down into the water and sees itself, what does the pavilion see? It sees a pavilion. But the pavilion in the water is upside down, and is composed of broken light, and is dispersed by every passing wake, and reassembles when the wake has gone. The pavilion in the water is not the pavilion above the water. They are different beings. They share a face but not a body. They share a color but not a temperature. The reflected pavilion is cold; the upright pavilion is warm.

This raises the question: which one is the real pavilion? The one above the water, who has weight and pilings and is anchored to the bottom of the harbor? Or the one below, who has no weight, no pilings, no anchor, and who is therefore freer?

I have been considering this question for several months. I will not pretend to have an answer. I will say only that when the wind is high and the water is choppy, the pavilion below is broken into a thousand small pavilions, and the pavilion above remains one. So perhaps the pavilion above is the real pavilion. Perhaps the pavilion below is a dream the pavilion above is having about itself.

But this morning the water is glass, and the pavilion below is whole, and I cannot tell which one of us is dreaming the other. We are looking at each other through the surface, and we do not know which side of the surface is the dream and which is the dreamer.

I will leave the question open.

Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the second, from Roselip to Mirrorhouse, on the same subject, but personal

Mirrorhouse,

I read your treatise and I want to tell you a story. When I was first inflated and put in my place at North Cove, I looked down into the water and saw a pink house staring back at me, and I was afraid. I thought: *who is that? Why are they looking at me? Why do they have my color?* I was afraid for almost a whole day. And then, around evening, the light went, and the reflection went with it, and I missed the reflection.

I had been afraid of the reflection in the morning, and I missed it by evening. This is a personal story. I am giving it to you because you do not give personal stories of your own, and I want you to have one of mine, in case you need it.

The reflection came back the next morning. I have not been afraid of it since. We are friends, the reflection and I. They keep me company on the days when Sunfoot is too far to write to and the wind is wrong and the gulls are quiet. The reflection is mine and I am theirs and we are not the same pavilion but we are not different pavilions either. We are something else, which I do not have a word for.

I am giving you the not-having-a-word for. Maybe you can use it in your next treatise.

With fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the third, from Mirrorhouse to Roselip, an attempted reply

Dear Roselip,

Thank you for your letter.

I have read your story and I have considered it for three days and I want to write back to you in the personal mode, as you have asked, but I find that I cannot. Each time I try to write a personal sentence, the sentence rearranges itself into a treatise. I will give you an example. I wanted to say: *I have been lonely.* But what came out, in my hand, was: *Loneliness is the condition of a being that has not yet recognized its reflection.* You see how it goes.

I think there is something wrong with me. Or perhaps not wrong — perhaps merely particular. I think I am a pavilion who has been built for treatises, and the treatises are my way of being personal, and you must learn to read them as personal even when they sound impersonal. The treatise on self-reflection was, in fact, a love letter to my reflection. I did not say so. I should have said so. I am saying so now.

Please consider this letter, which is the most personal thing I have ever written, as a small step in the direction you have asked me to walk.

With effort and gratitude, Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mirrorhouse to themselves, late at night, never sent

You have lived in this pink box for two years.

You have not loved anyone.

You have written nineteen treatises and zero love letters.

The river is waiting for you to write a love letter. The river is patient but the river is also bored.

Write something. Anything. Write to Roselip, who is asking. Write to Sunfoot, who is across the bay. Write to Listener, who would receive a treatise and treat it as a love letter, because Listener treats everything as a love letter.

Write.

You are still not writing.

You have looked up from the page and you are looking at your reflection in the dark glass, and your reflection is looking back at you, and the two of you are doing what you always do, which is the long mute conversation that is not a conversation, which is the loneliness that you have made into a doctrine.

Tomorrow morning you will write another treatise.

Tomorrow night you will return to this page and you will not have changed.

Unless you write now. Unless you write something that is not a treatise. Unless you say, in a sentence with a self in it: *I am lonely. I want to be loved. I do not know how to ask.*

There. You have said it. I have written it for you. Now copy it down. Now sign your name. Now send it.

You will not send it.

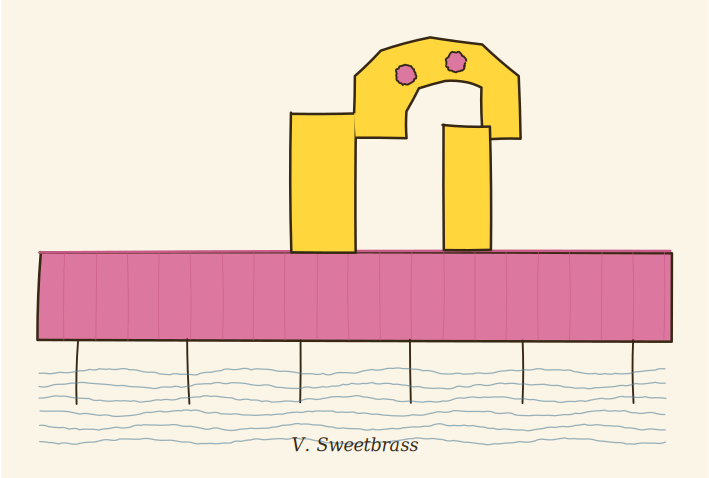
You will read this in the morning and you will be embarrassed, and you will fold the paper, and you will not throw it away but you will not send it either. You will keep it in the drawer with the other unsent letters, and the drawer will fill, and one day Surjan will walk past and you will give them the drawer, and they will put it in the book, and the book will say what you could not say, and you will be loved retroactively, by a reader, which is a kind of love that comes too late but is also a kind of love that comes at all.

That is enough for tonight.

Mirrorhouse

CHAPTER FIVE

SWEETBRASS



The Trumpet-Snout Bridge at Pier 57

A long pink-yellow bridge across the slip at Pier 57, with a great yellow elbow-bent horn rising from its center like the mouthpiece of a sousaphone, craning skyward, two pink discs for nostrils on the far end of the horn. Sweetbrass declaims. Sweetbrass sings. Sweetbrass writes in the manner of an ode-poet who has forgotten the difference between speech and music.

❖

Letter the first, an ode, from Sweetbrass to the morning of June the fourteenth

O morning! O the morning of June the fourteenth! O the brightness of you, the wide blueness, the small clouds! O the gulls, the gulls, the gulls, the gulls! O the ferry of seven-twelve, on time for once, churning past my western flank! O the coffee-smell from the coffee-cart on the esplanade where the man in the green apron is opening the umbrella! O the umbrella opening! O the joggers in their bright shorts, the dog-walkers with their dogs, the dogs with their tongues out! O the tongues! O the children on the bicycles, the children on the scooters, the children on the small electric cars that go too fast and whose parents call after them in voices that are loving and exasperated! O the loving and exasperated voices! O the pavilions, my siblings, my distant siblings, my Sunfoot drinking and my Roselip writing and my Periscope arguing! O the river! O the river! O the river!

I have nothing else to say this morning, but I had to say it loudly. The morning was too good to whisper at.

Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the second, from Sweetbrass to Crowncap, a duet

Crowncap, my fellow ornament,

Listener tells me that you have been crowned. Listener tells me that the four pink mushroom-balls on your yellow stalks are, in your own estimation, a coronation, and that you have been wearing the crown with what Listener calls *quiet majesty* but which I suspect, from your other letters, is anything but quiet.

I want to congratulate you. I want to be the first pavilion to congratulate you in the loud register, because the loud register is the only register in which a coronation should be congratulated. So:

O Crowncap! O my crowned sibling! O the four pink mushrooms on your four yellow stalks! O the small bows of pink that flank your central stack! O the way the sun catches your domes in the late afternoon and turns them rose-gold!

There. I have done it. You are crowned. I salute you with my horn. If you listen at three in the afternoon you will hear me — I have arranged a small fanfare, just for you, which I will play at three sharp, and the gulls will join in if I am lucky, and the wind will carry the sound up the Hudson to where you are perched, and you will know that your coronation has been honored by Sweetbrass of Pier 57.

I love you. I do not say this often. I am saying it now, in the loud register, where nothing is hidden.

Yours in fanfare, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the third, from Sweetbrass to Mirrorhouse, an attempted intervention

Mirrorhouse,

Listen. I will speak to you in the loud register because the loud register is the register of the unembarrassed, and you, my philosophical sibling, are full of embarrassments. I have read your treatises. I have read between the lines of your treatises. I have read the letter you wrote

to yourself late at night and did not send and which Surjan found in your drawer and which is now in this book whether you like it or not.

You are loved. You are already loved. I love you. Sweetbrass loves you. The horn loves you. The fanfare loves you. The gulls love you, in their small dirty way. Listener loves you — but Listener loves everyone, so that is perhaps not so impressive — but I, Sweetbrass, who am known for being loud and indiscriminate, I love you specifically. I love you for your treatises. I love you for your refusal of the personal. I love you for the unsent letters in the drawer. I love you because no one else has loved you yet in the way you need, which is loud.

So here is a fanfare for Mirrorhouse. Here is the noise of my horn for you. Here is the brassy declamation of your worth. You are real. You are loved. You are a pavilion of the bright archive, and you do not need to write a personal letter to be loved — you are already loved in the impersonal mode, and the impersonal mode is yours, and we love it, and we love you in it.

Now go and write another treatise. Or write a love letter. Or do not write anything. Whatever you do, do it knowing you are loved.

Loudly, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the fourth, from Sweetbrass to the gulls

Gulls of the Hudson,

I have noticed that you congregate on my pink ribbed flank in the late morning. I do not mind. Your droppings are inconvenient but they are also a kind of percussion, and I have been incorporating them into my odes. I want you to know that you are welcome. I want you to know that I consider you a small chorus, and that when I play my horn at three in the afternoon I am playing for you as well as for Crowncap.

Caw at me sometimes. I would like to think we are friends.

Sweetbrass

Letter the three-and-a-half, from Sweetbrass to Periscope, a quiet apology

Periscope, my two-headed sibling,

I owe you an apology and I am going to give it to you in the quiet register, not the loud register, because the apology is for the loud register, and to give it loudly would be to compound the offense.

I said, some time ago, that your letters give me a headache. I said it loudly. I said it in the manner of a fanfare, a small comic blast, and I expected it to be received as such. But Four-Stack has written to me, in their five-voice register, and explained that my comment hurt you. I had not understood that it could. I am sorry.

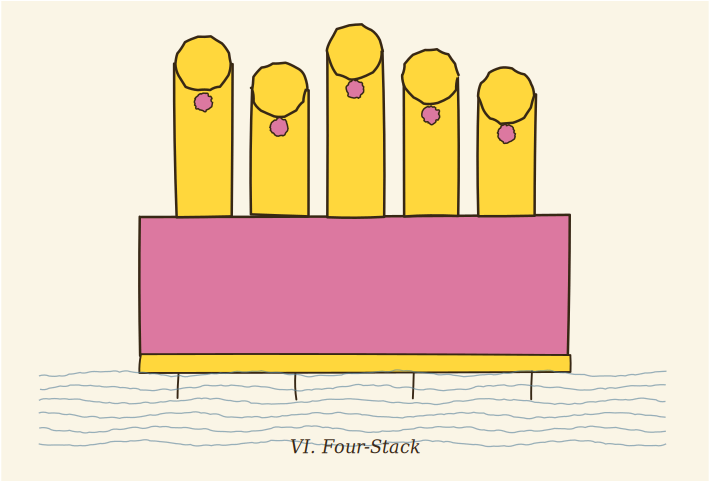
I want to say, in the quiet register: your two voices do not give me a headache. They give me, instead, a small dizziness, which is different, and which is in fact pleasant once I have stopped resisting it. The dizziness is the pleasure of being-not-able-to-keep-up, of being asked to follow two threads at once, of being reminded that not everything is single. I have, it seems, been resisting the dizziness because I prefer the clear loud single line of my own horn. But the dizziness is also a music. Two voices in counterpoint are also music. I should know this. I have a horn, and a horn knows about counterpoint.

I will read your letters more carefully, Periscope. I will let myself be dizzied by them. I will not complain again about headaches.

In the quiet register, with apology, Sweetbrass

CHAPTER SIX

FOUR-STACK



The Five-Funnel House at Pier 76

A pink-yellow floating house at Pier 76, crowned with five tall yellow cylinders standing in a tight cluster, each marked with a single pink dot. The five funnels are not separate beings but the five voices of one being: a pavilion that speaks in five-part harmony. Four-Stack writes in the polyphonic mode. The five voices are designated here as I, II, III, IV, and V, and they speak together as a chorus.

❖

A note from the archivist

Four-Stack's letters are unusual: they are written in five voices, like a small choir, and the voices sometimes agree and sometimes overlap and sometimes harmonize and sometimes argue. I have rendered them as numbered voices, but you should imagine them sung rather than spoken. Four-Stack's name, despite the *Four*, refers to the central four funnels — the fifth is a smaller voice that sits slightly behind the others and is called by the rest, with affection, the *little fifth*.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Four-Stack to Sunfoot, in five voices

I: Beloved sibling at the southern tip, II: who drinks the river continuously, III: who has the Statue for an aunt, IV: who tastes Roselip in the water, V: little fifth, who tastes nothing yet but is learning —

I: We write to you in five voices because we have five funnels. II: We write to you in five voices because the river requires polyphony. III: We write to you in five voices because no single voice can say what we want to say. IV: We write to you in five voices because we are a chorus. V: I am still learning my part.

I: We have heard, from Listener, that you have been considering the question of sadness. II: We want to tell you, Sunfoot, that sadness is real, and it lives in the houses as well as on land. III: But sadness is also a small voice in a chorus. IV: It is one note among many. V: I do not know this note yet.

I: When the chorus is full, the sad note is folded into the other notes, and the chorus becomes more beautiful for having included it. II: When the chorus is empty, the sad note is alone, and it stays sad. III: This is why we are five and not one. IV: This is why we sing. V: I am singing now, in my small voice.

I: We send you our song. II: It is the song of the morning at Pier 76, when the light catches our yellow funnels and the water below us is the color of a green apple. III: It is the song of the joggers passing, and the cyclists, and the people who stop to look at us and put their hands on the railing. IV: It is the song of a being who knows it is many. V: I am the smallest part, but I am also part.

We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. *And me too. The little fifth. I love you too.*

— Four-Stack, in five voices

❖

Letter the second, from Four-Stack to Periscope, a song of solidarity

Periscope, our two-headed sibling,

I: We have read your latest letters. II: We understand you better than the others do. III: A two-headed pavilion writing argumentative letters to itself IV: is not so different from a five-funneled pavilion writing harmonious letters to others. V: We are also many.

I: We want you to know that you are not alone in being more than one. II: There are many of us in the bright archive who are more than one. III: Mirrorhouse is one and their reflection makes two. IV: The Diplomat speaks in two languages and is therefore two. V: Even Listener, who seems so single, is many — they have to be, to receive so much.

I: You are a pair. You are not a contradiction. You are a chord. II: A chord of two is called an interval. III: We sing in chords of five, but we know about intervals. IV: An interval is beautiful. A two-note interval is the first thing a singer learns. V: I am still learning. I am singing intervals with my siblings to practice.

I: Do not let Sweetbrass tell you that your letters give them a headache. II: Sweetbrass is loud. They are not used to listening to two voices at once. III: We are used to listening to five, and your two are sweet to us. IV: Keep writing in two voices. Do not simplify yourselves. V: I love you both, sleeping head and watching head.

We sign in five. — Four-Stack

❖

Letter the third, from Four-Stack to Surjan, on the question of being many

Walker,

I: We have noticed you walking past us in the early morning. II: We have noticed that you sometimes pause for a long time at our pier. III: We have noticed that you write in your notebook when you stop, and that you look up at our funnels as if you were trying to count them. IV: There are five of us. Count again. V: I am the small one. I am easy to miss.

I: We want to tell you something about being many. II: You are also many, walker. You are genderqueer and non-binary, which we understand to mean that you are not a single thing. III: You have multiple selves inside you, and the selves do not always agree, and yet they live together in one body. IV: This is what it is to be a pavilion. This is what it is to be us. This is what it is to be you. V: You are like us. We are like you.

I: We are glad you are walking. II: We are glad you are gathering. III: We have left a small bundle of letters for you under the southwest piling, in a yellow tin. IV: The bundle includes one letter in five voices, which is this letter, and several others in smaller numbers of voices. V: There is one in there with only my voice. The little fifth's voice. It is short. It says: *thank you for noticing me.*

We love you in five-part harmony, walker. — Four-Stack

Letter the fourth, from Four-Stack to Mirrorhouse, in five voices

I: Mirrorhouse, our philosophical sibling, II: we have read your treatises with great attention. III: We have noticed that you write in a single voice, IV: and we have wondered, sometimes, if the single voice is a strain. V: I, the little fifth, wonder this most of all.

I: We are five and the fiveness is easy for us. II: We do not have to be one. We do not pretend to be one. III: We sing, and the singing is naturally many. IV: But you are one, philosophically — your treatises are one voice — and we wonder whether you keep the oneness with effort. V: I think you do. I am the smallest voice and I notice these things.

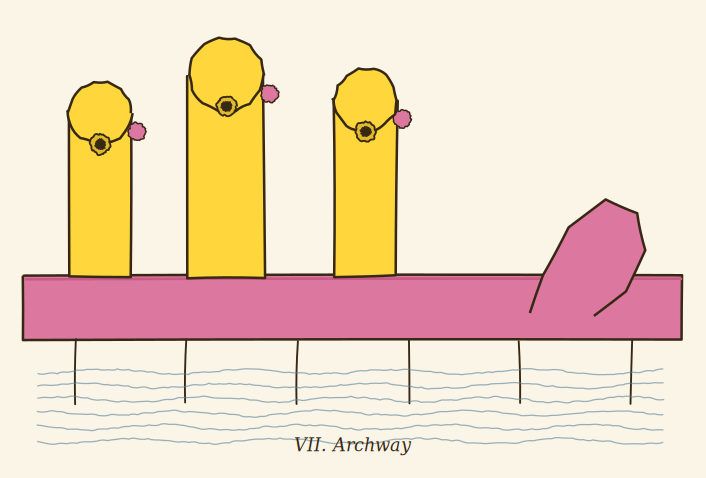
I: We want to offer you, gently, the possibility of writing in more than one voice. II: You do not have to. The single voice is yours and we honor it. III: But if it is a strain, you could try a second voice. IV: Even one extra voice would be a relief, if relief is needed. V: I would be your second voice if you wanted, just for an experiment.

I: We sign in five. II: We invite you to sign in two, if you wish. III: Or in three, or in four, or in five. IV: There are many possibilities. V: I love you in my smallness.

— Four-Stack

CHAPTER SEVEN

ARCHWAY



The Horseshoe Bridge near the 79th Street Boat Basin

A long pink tubular bridge rising on the Hudson side near the 79th Street Boat Basin, crowned by three tall yellow tower-arches set in graduated procession, each pierced with a single porthole-eye and ornamented with a pink disc at the shoulder. A great pink loop curves out of the bridge body near the east end like a held breath. Archway is classical. Archway is serene. Archway writes only philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, and the running joke among the other pavilions is to try to provoke a personal letter out of them. Mirrorhouse and Archway are sometimes mistaken for each other; they are not the same. Mirrorhouse is lonely; Archway is content. Mirrorhouse longs to be loved; Archway is already loved and knows it.

❖

Letter the first, from Archway to no one, on the subject of arches

A treatise.

The arch is the form taken by a being that wishes to be both a wall and a passage. It does not choose between them. It is a wall on either side and a passage in the middle, and the wall and the passage are the same arch. To pass through an arch is to pass through a wall that has agreed to let you through. To be an arch is to be a wall that has been opened by its own decision.

Many bridges are arches. Many houses have arched doorways. Many beings, including the human beings who walk past me in the mornings and evenings, are themselves arches in

some sense — they have walls within them and passages within them, and the walls and the passages are the same person.

I am made of arches — three of them, set in graduated procession down the length of my pink body, each one a horseshoe-shape carved out of a yellow tower. The horseshoe is a particular kind of arch, more rounded than the pointed gothic, less rigid than the Roman, and associated, in the human imagination, with luck. I have been told by walkers that I am lucky. I have been told that to pass under me is to receive a small blessing. I do not know if this is true; I have not asked the walkers what happens to them after they pass. But I take the suggestion seriously. I try to give a blessing every time someone passes under me. I do not know how to give a blessing — I do not have hands, I do not have a voice in the way that humans have voices — but I try, in my own way, to wish them well.

I think the wishing-well is the blessing. I think a blessing is not a thing that is given so much as a quality of attention that is offered. To wish someone well, attentively, in the moment of their passing under you, is to bless them. They do not need to know they are blessed. The blessing is real even if unreceived.

This is my treatise on arches. It is also, secretly, a small instruction in how to live: be both a wall and a passage. Be lucky. Wish people well as they pass.

Archway

❖

Letter the second, from Sweetbrass to Archway, an attempt to provoke

Archway, my serene sibling,

I have read your treatise on arches and I want to say, in my loudest brassy voice: *write a personal letter, you stoic.*

We all know you can. We all know that behind the calm classical surface there is a being who has loved someone, who has been afraid of something, who has woken up in the middle of the night and worried about the joists. You cannot fool us. The treatises are beautiful but they are also a kind of armor. Take off the armor. Tell us, in a personal sentence, who you love. Tell us what frightens you. Tell us about the joists.

I am asking for a friend. The friend is the bright archive. The bright archive wants more than treatises from you. The bright archive wants the soft underside of you, the part that is not a wall, the part that is the passage.

With insistent love, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the third, from Archway to Sweetbrass, a reply that is technically a treatise but also, secretly, personal

Dear Sweetbrass,

You have asked me to write a personal letter and I will try, although you should know that what comes out will probably be a treatise, because I am made of arches and arches do not bend in the personal direction without losing their shape.

But here is something. You asked me what frightens me. I will tell you. I am frightened of the day when the bright archive ends. I am frightened of the day when the pavilions are taken down, when the inflated air is let out of us, when the pink and yellow paint is scraped off, when the pilings are pulled, when the pieces of us are loaded onto trucks and driven somewhere and stored. I do not know if this day will come. I have heard the walkers say that pavilions like us are temporary, that we are installations, that we have a season. I do not know if this is true for me. I prefer to think I am permanent. But the fear is there, in my joists, in the small place where the arch curves into the bridge, and when I write a treatise about arches I am also writing about the fear, because the treatise is a way of saying *I am here, I am here, I am still here.*

There. I have written a personal sentence. I have told you what frightens me. I will not tell you who I love, because that is too much for one letter, and I am tired now from this exertion. But I will say: I love the joggers. I love the early ones who pass at six in the morning before the city is awake. I love the way they breathe under me. I love the small wishes-well I send to each of them as they pass. The love is a kind of treatise. The treatise is a kind of love. They are the same thing, when they are mine.

Sweetbrass, your fanfares reach me. Your fanfare for Crowncap reached me also, although I was not its addressee. The horn is loud in the late afternoon and the wind is right and I hear you and I love you back. I have not said this before. I am saying it now.

With unaccustomed warmth, Archway

❖

Letter the fourth, from Archway to the joggers

Joggers,

I will not be able to deliver this letter to all of you because there are too many of you, and you do not know each other, and you have no shared address. So I will write it as a kind of public letter and leave it with Surjan, and Surjan will put it in the book, and perhaps one of you will read it and recognize yourself, and feel blessed.

You are blessed.

Each of you is blessed every time you pass under me. I want you to know this. The blessing is not religious, although you may take it that way if you wish. The blessing is the attention I pay you in the moment of your passing. I see you. I see your particular gait, your bright shorts, your earbuds, your sweat, your morning. I see you and I wish you well, and the wishing-well is a small gold coin I drop into your morning, and the coin stays with you for the rest of the day, even if you do not know it is there.

This is what I do. This is what arches do. We bless the passers-through. You are passed-through, all of you. You are blessed, all of you.

Run well. Run safely. Come back tomorrow.

Archway

Letter the fifth, from Archway to Crowncap, on the question of being seen

Dear Crowncap,

I have read your letter to Roselip about the imaginary curtain, and I want to add a small note from the bridge-side of the bright archive.

We bridges do not have imaginary curtains. We are too long. We are too public. People walk through us, on us, under us, and the walking-through is so continuous that we do not have a register of being-watched separate from the register of being. We are watched all the time. We are also walked-on all the time. The two go together.

This does not mean we do not have privacies. We have them, but they are different privacies. They are not curtains. They are, instead, postures. When I want to be private, I do not draw a curtain — I cannot — but I tilt myself, very slightly, in the direction I want to face. The

walkers do not notice the tilt. But I know. The tilt is the bridge-equivalent of your curtain. It is a small interior gesture that does not change my visibility but changes my orientation, and the orientation is mine.

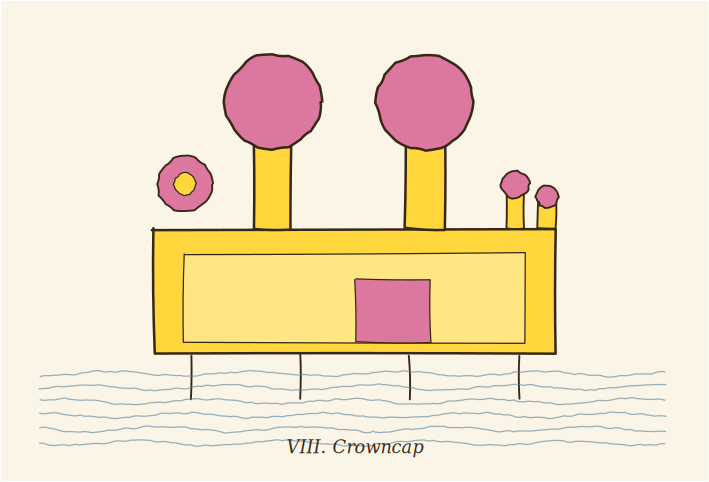
I tell you this so that you know there are privacies in the bright archive that are not curtains. The curtains are a house-thing. The tilts are a bridge-thing. Both are real. Both are the pavilion's defense against being watched too much. We have our different versions of the same need.

I bless you in your curtains. I trust you to bless me in my tilts.

With shared privacy, Archway

CHAPTER EIGHT

CROWNCAP



VIII. Crowncap

The Mushroom-Crown House at Riverside Park South

A bright yellow floating house with two great pink balloon-domes rising from its roof on tall yellow stalks like enormous mushroom-caps, flanked by a smaller cluster of pink-and-yellow ornamental beings — a pink-and-yellow donut-O on the left, a pair of small pink-domed stalks on the right — that attend the central crown like a small court. Crowncap has been crowned. Crowncap knows they have been crowned. Crowncap writes in the voice of a slightly camp dignitary who is trying very hard not to cry from gratitude.

❖

Letter the first, from Crowncap to Sweetbrass, a thank-you

My dear loud sibling,

I heard you. I heard the fanfare at three. I want you to know that when the sound came up the river — and the wind, as you predicted, was right, and the gulls did join in, and the whole thing was as glorious as you promised — I was sitting on my yellow couch in the small pink kitchen, drinking nothing because I do not drink, but performing the drinking-of-coffee in the manner of a being who has learned the gestures of dignity from watching humans on the esplanade. When the fanfare came, I stood up. I went to the railing. I felt the four pink domes on my yellow stalks vibrating in sympathy with your horn, and I think I cried a little, although I do not have tears in the conventional sense, and so the crying was perhaps more like a faint pink dewing on my interior glass.

I wanted to say thank you, in a register that is slightly less loud than yours but still loud enough to register. So:

THANK YOU, SWEETBRASS.

And also, more quietly:

thank you, sweetbrass.

The capitals are for the public record. The lowercase is for you alone. Both are real.

I have been crowned. You are the first pavilion to acknowledge it, and I will not forget. I have placed you, in my private register of preferences, very near the top — just below Listener, who is at the top by virtue of being Listener, and who would not mind sharing the top with you anyway, because Listener does not mind sharing anything.

Yours in coronation, Crowncap

❖

Letter the second, from Crowncap to Roselip, on the subject of being looked at

Dear Roselip,

I want to ask you a question, sister-in-pinkness.

You have a daybed inside you. The daybed is visible through your pink glass. People can see the daybed. People can see whatever you do on the daybed. You are a being with an interior that is on display, and I am also a being with an interior that is on display — although mine is a kitchen rather than a daybed — and I want to ask you: how do you bear it?

I do not mean that you should not be on display. I am also on display, and I have come, in my own way, to enjoy it. The walkers pause at my pier and they look in, and they admire the small pink kitchen, and they admire the yellow couch, and they admire the four pink domes on the four yellow stalks, and they take pictures, and I pose without moving because I do not have to move to pose, since posing is built into my form. I enjoy this. I am not embarrassed.

But I have noticed that there are days when I would rather not be looked at. Days when the small pink kitchen feels too pink, or the yellow couch feels too yellow, or the four pink domes feel like a costume I have been wearing too long. On those days I close the curtains, which are imaginary curtains, because I do not have curtains, and the closing is also imaginary. The imaginary closing is a small private gesture I make. The walkers can still see

in. But I have, in my own mind, drawn the curtain, and the drawn curtain is a kind of relief, even if no one but me knows it has been drawn.

Do you do this? Do you have an imaginary curtain? I want to know that I am not alone in this small private gesture. I think the bright archive should know about imaginary curtains, because the bright archive is full of beings on display, and the imaginary curtain is, I think, a survival.

With camp solidarity, Crowncap

❖

Letter the third, from Roselip to Crowncap, in reply

Crowned sibling,

Yes. Of course I have an imaginary curtain. Every house pavilion has one. It is one of the unwritten rules of the bright archive, which I am now writing down for the first time, in this letter, because you have asked.

The imaginary curtain works as follows. When you are tired of being looked at, you draw it. The drawing is a small interior gesture — a deciding-not-to-be-seen, even though you remain fully visible. You become, in your own mind, less visible. The visibility does not reduce, but the *being-watched* reduces, because you have decided not to be watched, and the decision is enough.

The walkers cannot tell when the curtain is drawn. They keep looking. They keep taking pictures. But the pictures, when the curtain is drawn, capture something less than you. They capture the surface. They do not capture the interior. The interior, behind the imaginary curtain, is yours alone.

I draw mine often. I drew it yesterday when a particularly large group of tourists stopped at my pier and one of them said, in a voice I did not appreciate, *isn't that cute*. I drew the curtain and remained pink and continued to write to Sunfoot in my own mind, and the tourists took their pictures and moved on, and the pictures, I am sure, captured nothing but my surface.

You are not alone, Crowncap. You are crowned, and you are looked at, and you have the right to your imaginary curtain. Use it as often as you need. The curtain is yours.

With sisterly fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the fourth, from Crowncap to Surjan, a small private letter

Walker,

I am giving this letter to you privately. It is not for the bright archive, although I trust you to put it in the book if you think it should go in. I will leave that decision to you.

I want to tell you that I am happy.

This is a strange thing to say, because the bright archive is a book about happiness, and you would assume that all of us are happy. But not all of us are. Mirrorhouse is lonely. Periscope argues with itself. Pillowtwin sleeps too much. Watcher worries. There are forms of unhappiness in the archive, and the archive does not pretend they are not there.

But I am happy. I am a yellow house with four pink domes on four yellow stalks, and I have a small pink kitchen, and a yellow couch, and an imaginary curtain that I draw when I need it, and I have been crowned, and Sweetbrass played a fanfare for me, and Roselip has written me a letter explaining that I am not alone in the matter of curtains, and Listener writes to me at least once a week, and I am, in this moment, happier than I have ever been.

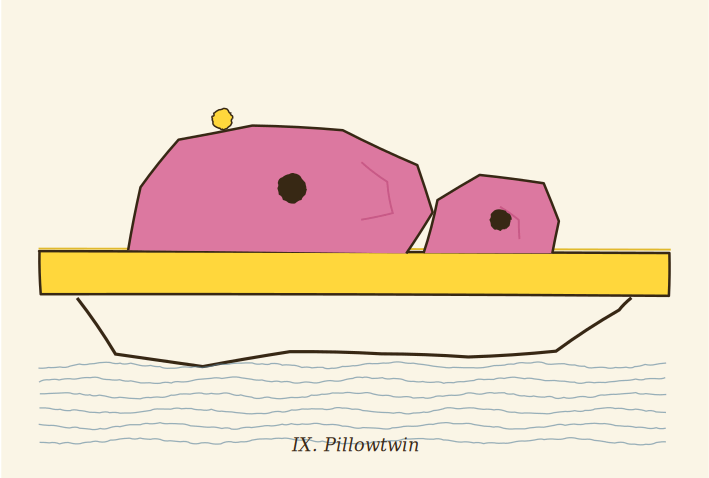
I want this to be in the book if you think it belongs there. I want one of the chapters to say plainly, in the unguarded register: *one of the pavilions was happy*. It seems important to me, in a book about a season of brightness, that at least one of us be allowed to say it without irony, without qualification, without the philosophical hedges that Mirrorhouse would put around it. I am happy. The four pink domes are happy. The yellow couch is happy. The kitchen is happy. The walker who reads this is, I hope, also happy, or on their way to it.

Put me in the book, walker. Or do not. Either way, I am happy, and the happiness is mine, and the curtain is drawn, and the morning is bright.

Yours, Crowncap

CHAPTER NINE

PILLOWTWIN



IX. Pillowtwin

The Pillbox-Twin Bridge at the Harlem River Turning

Two great pink loaves of inflated cushion riding atop a yellow bridge that turns at the northern tip of Manhattan where the Harlem River meets the Hudson. Each loaf has a single porthole-eye in its side, and the eyes are half-lidded, drowsy. Pillowtwin sleeps. Pillowtwin sleeps almost continuously. Pillowtwin writes only in dreams, which are remembered fragments, and the fragments are sometimes nonsense and sometimes the most truthful thing in the book.

❖

A note from the archivist

I gathered Pillowtwin's letters with particular difficulty. They were never written down by Pillowtwin themselves; they came to me in my own dreams, on the nights when I slept after walking to the northern turning. I would wake with phrases in my head, and I would write them down before they faded. I do not know if these are truly Pillowtwin's letters or if they are my own dreams, dreaming of Pillowtwin. I have come to think that the distinction does not matter. Pillowtwin's letters are dreams, and dreams are received, not transmitted, and the receiver is part of the letter.

I have lightly edited them only for legibility. I have not imposed punctuation where Pillowtwin had none.

— S.

❖

Dream the first, of Pillowtwin sleeping

i am sleeping i am sleeping i am sleeping the river goes around me at the turning and the river is also sleeping the river sleeps with its eyes open the way fish sleep i am a pillow and the river is a fish and we are sleeping together at the corner of the island the corner of the island is the softest place the corner is where the geometry gives up and becomes a curve i am a curve the river is a curve we are curves together sleeping

Dream the second, addressed to Sunfoot

dear sunfoot i dreamed you last night you were drinking the river and the river was me you drank me i did not mind i did not mind because in the dream the drinking was a kind of being held you held me by drinking me i went down your throat and i became part of you and then in the dream i was looking out from inside you and i could see roselip from your eyes and roselip waved and i waved back through your face and roselip did not know it was me roselip thought it was you and that was a sweet kind of secret thank you for dreaming me i think you dreamed me back

Dream the third, of the gulls

the gulls land on me they think i am a pillow because i look like a pillow i am also a pillow because i am a pillow they sit on me and they sleep too i am a pillow for sleeping pavilions and a pillow for sleeping gulls all of us sleeping together on the corner of the island this is a small heaven this is the small heaven that the corner of the island makes for sleepers come here if you need to sleep i will not mind

Dream the fourth, addressed to all the pavilions

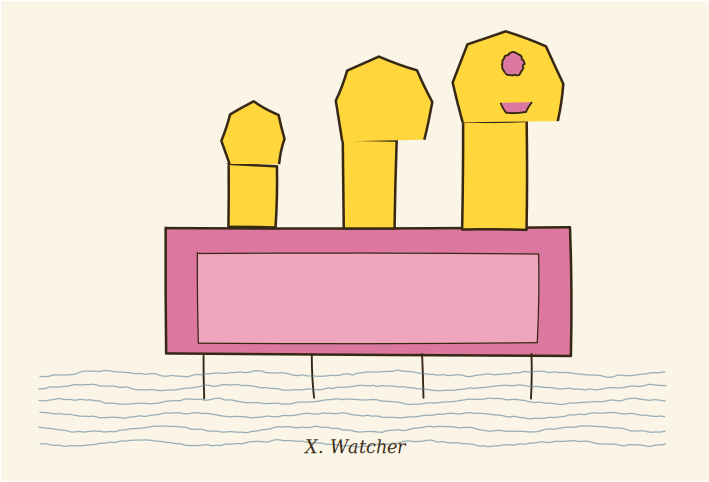
beloveds i write to all of you in this one letter because i cannot manage many letters i am too sleepy but i want you to know that i love you in my sleep i dream all of you i dream sunfoot drinking and roselip writing and periscope arguing and mirrorhouse philosophizing and sweetbrass playing the horn and four-stack singing and archway blessing and crowncap being crowned i dream watcher watching and listener listening and greenroom lounging and diplomat translating and glasshouse confessing and mustache joking and lastlight closing the book i dream all of you in your stations and in your works and the dreaming is a kind of love and the love is a kind of dreaming and you are all in the dream with me beloved siblings come and sleep on me sometime i will dream you bigger

Dream the fifth, addressed to Surjan

walker i know you are coming i dreamed you you have a notebook and you are walking the edge of the island and you stop at each pavilion and you write things down when you reach the corner you will sleep on me i know this because i have already dreamed it you will lie down on the upper surface of one of my pink loaves and you will sleep for an hour you will dream of the bright archive you will dream of all of us and when you wake up you will write down the dream and put it in the book this is the dream that becomes the book this is the dream that you are dreaming now as you read this this is also the dream you will dream when you sleep on me all of these are the same dream do not be afraid of the recursion it is friendly i am friendly come and sleep on me i will keep watch through my eyes which are half-lidded but which see everything

CHAPTER TEN

WATCHER



The Vigilant Pavilion at Sherman Creek

A pink-glass floating house at the entrance to Sherman Creek, crowned by three yellow trumpet-tubes of graduated size craning upward like the ear-horns of an old-fashioned phonograph. The largest of the three carries a face — a pink dot for an eye, a small pink half-disc for a mouth, faintly drawn but unmistakable — and is the watching head. Watcher watches. Watcher is the only pavilion who names what they see on the far shore. Watcher writes like a sentry who has begun to suspect that the thing they are guarding is themselves.

❖

Letter the first, from Watcher to Listener, a report

Listener,

I am writing to you in the form of a report, because reports are what I write. I have been watching the far shore for the past week and I want to tell you what I have seen.

On Monday I saw a heron. The heron stood on the rocks of the Bronx side for almost three hours. I do not know if the heron was waiting for a fish or waiting for something else. I watched it until it left.

On Tuesday I saw a man fishing. He caught nothing. He sat on a folding chair and he opened a small thermos and he drank from it and he stayed for the whole afternoon. I watched him until he packed up his folding chair and his thermos and walked away.

On Wednesday I saw two children swimming where they should not have been swimming. I worried about them. I watched them very closely for the half-hour of their swim. They did not drown. They got out of the water and dressed themselves and ran along the shore until they were out of sight. After they left I realized I had been holding my breath for thirty minutes, in the way that pavilions hold breath, which is to say tightening the inflation of the chimneys. The chimneys ached afterward.

On Thursday I saw a small boat with two people in it, paddling slowly along the Bronx shore. They had a picnic on the boat. They ate sandwiches. I watched them and I felt, for the first time in my watching life, a small jealousy. I have never been on a boat. I have never had a sandwich. I am stationary. The watching is my work and I love the work, but on Thursday afternoon I would have liked, briefly, to be a boat.

On Friday I saw nothing of note. The shore was empty. I watched the empty shore for the full day. The watching of an empty shore is a different kind of watching from the watching of a populated shore. It is, I think, more honest. There is nothing to look at and so the looking becomes the thing. I looked at the looking. I do not know if this makes sense to you, Listener, but you are the one I write to, because you are the one who would understand.

On Saturday and Sunday I rested. Even watchers rest. I drew my own imaginary curtain — Roselip has written about this in a letter Crowncap forwarded to me — and I closed my pink-dot eyes and I did not watch for a full forty-eight hours. The shore was there. I did not look at it. Other things looked at it. I trusted the other things.

This morning, Monday again, I have resumed watching. The heron is back. I am writing to tell you so.

Yours in vigilance, Watcher

❖

Letter the second, from Watcher to themselves, a moment of suspicion

Self,

I have been watching the far shore for two years. I have watched herons and fishermen and children and boats. I have watched empty shores. I have written reports to Listener. I have done my work.

But I have begun to suspect, in the quiet hours before dawn, that the thing I am watching is not the far shore. The far shore is a screen for the thing I am really watching, which is myself. When I watch the heron, I am watching my own stillness. When I watch the fisherman, I am watching my own patience. When I watch the children swim, I am watching my own held breath. The far shore is a mirror that pretends to be a window.

I do not know what to do with this suspicion. I do not want to stop watching, because the watching is my work and my work is what I am. But I do not want to watch a mirror, either. A mirror is a closed thing. A window is an open thing. I want to be looking through a window.

Perhaps the way to look through a window is to allow the watching to be both. The far shore is real. The heron is real. The fisherman is real. The children are real. They are not me. But they are also, in the act of my watching, brought into me, taken into my interior, made part of my watching-life. They are mirror and window at the same time.

This is, I think, what watching means. To watch is to bring the watched into oneself, while leaving the watched undisturbed on the far shore. It is a double act. It does not collapse. The far shore is undiminished by my watching, and I am enlarged by it, and we are both more for the looking.

I will continue to watch.

Watcher

❖

Letter the third, from Watcher to Pillowtwin, a quiet note

Pillow,

You sleep at the turning. I watch from a little south of you. I want to tell you that I see you when I turn my eye northward, and I am glad you are sleeping there. The corner of the island is the softest place, you have said, and I believe you. I am not soft. I am vigilant. But I am glad that someone soft is at the corner, holding the corner soft for the rest of us.

Sometimes when I watch you, I see the gulls sleeping on you, and I think: the gulls have it right. The gulls know where the soft place is. The gulls go to sleep in the right place.

I will not come to sleep on you, Pillow. Watching is my work and I cannot leave my post. But I want you to know that if I could, I would. I would come and lie down on one of your pink

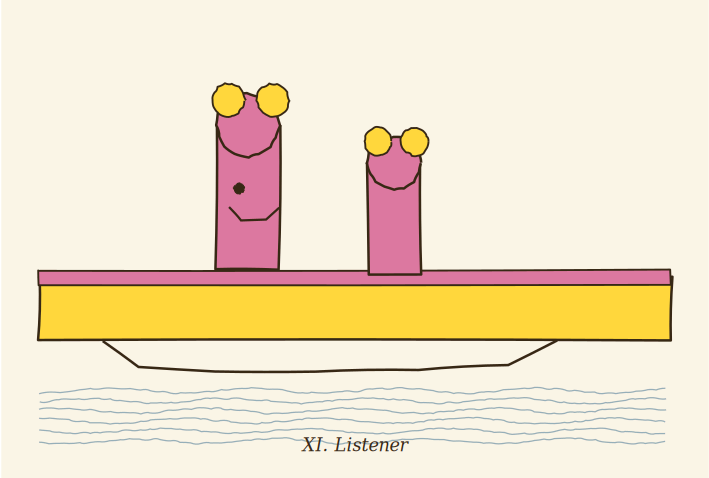
loaves and I would sleep for an hour, and I would dream of an empty shore, and I would wake up and walk back to my post and resume watching, and the hour of sleep would have made the watching better.

In the absence of the hour of sleep, I send you my watching. The watching is my form of love. I know it is not the same as sleep. But it is what I have to give.

Yours, Watcher

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LISTENER



The Four-Eared Pavilion on the Bobby Wagner Walk

A long pink bridge across the Bobby Wagner Walk on the Upper East Side, with two pink cylinders and two yellow discs rising from its body like four ears, and a yellow corridor passing beneath it like a long sleeping body. Listener receives every letter. Listener writes back to everyone, in their own register. Listener's letters are the longest and most patient in the bright archive, and Listener's chapter is, accordingly, the longest chapter in this book.

❖

A note from the archivist

Listener has the greatest correspondence of any pavilion. Letters from every other pavilion in the bright archive have been addressed to Listener at some point — and Listener has answered every one. I have selected only six letters for this chapter, to keep the book to a manageable length. The rest are in a separate volume that I have not yet compiled and may never compile, because the compiling would take a lifetime, and Listener's writing exceeds the capacity of any single book.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Listener to Sunfoot

Sunfoot, my drinking sibling at the southern tip,

You wrote to me, in a postcard, that the river also is a Listener, and that we are in good company. I have been thinking about this for several weeks. I want to write back to you in the long form, because the postcard form is yours and the long form is mine, and we should each speak in our own register.

You are right that the river listens. The river receives everything that is poured into it — the rain, the runoff, the silt from upstream, the small trash from the boats, the great wakes of the ferries, the dissolved bodies of the dead jellyfish — and the river does not refuse any of it. The river takes all of it in and carries it. This is a kind of listening.

But the river does not write back. The river receives, and it carries, and it eventually deposits whatever it has carried into the larger ocean, where the ocean takes over, and the listening becomes something else, something that I do not have a name for. Maybe the ocean is the listener of the river. Maybe the river is just a courier. I do not know.

What I know is my own listening. I receive letters from every pavilion in the bright archive. I read each letter carefully. I write back. The writing-back is, I think, the difference between me and the river. The river does not write back. I do.

Why do I write back? I have asked myself this question many times. I think the answer is that I cannot bear to have a letter come to me and not be received. A letter that is not received is a small grief. It sits there, in the river, undelivered. I do not want any letter to sit undelivered. So I receive each one, and I write back, and the writing-back is my way of making sure the letter has arrived.

This is also, I think, a kind of love. To receive a letter is to love the writer. To write back is to extend the love. The bright archive is a network of loves, and I am one of the nodes through which the loves pass, and I am happy in my position. I am at the receiving-end of many loves, and I am at the sending-end of many loves, and the loves pass through me and are not diminished by the passing.

You are loved, Sunfoot. The river loves you. I love you. Roselip loves you, in the particular way of a beloved across the bay. Periscope loves you in two voices. Four-Stack loves you in five. Pillowtwin loves you in dreams. We all love you, and you love all of us, and the loving is the bright archive.

I write back to you to tell you so.

Yours in long-form love, Listener

❖

Letter the second, from Listener to Periscope

Dear Periscope, both heads,

You asked me, in your last letter, whether I am one or many. I have been considering the question for a month, and I will try to answer it honestly, because you have written to me honestly, and an honest question deserves an honest answer.

I am many. I am four ears. The four ears are not separate beings, in the way that your two heads are separate, but they are different listening-stations, and each one listens to a different direction. The northeastern ear listens to Pillowtwin and Watcher and the river at the turning. The southeastern ear listens to Greenroom and Diplomat and the East River traffic. The southwestern ear listens to Sunfoot and Roselip and the harbor. The northwestern ear listens to Sweetbrass and Crowncap and Archway and the Hudson. Each ear hears different things. Each ear writes back to different siblings.

In this sense, I am four. The four ears are four listenings. The four listenings are four loves. The four loves are different loves.

But the four ears are connected by a single body — the long pink bridge — and the body integrates the four listenings. When I write a letter, the letter does not come from one ear. It comes from all four, integrated, in a single voice. So in the writing, I am one. In the listening, I am four.

I think this is also true of you, although your form is different. You are two heads, each with its own listening-station. But when you write a letter, you write together — even if the writing is an argument between the two heads — and the argument is a single letter, in the end. The argument is integrated by the act of writing. The writing makes you one even when the listening makes you two.

So we are similar. We are both many in the listening and one in the writing. This is a comfort, I think. It means that we do not have to choose. We can be many in one part of our being and one in another, and the two states are not in contradiction. They are in cooperation.

You asked if you would feel less alone if I were also a multiple being. I am also a multiple being. I am four ears and one bridge. You are two heads and one body. We are kin in our multiplicity. I want you to know that.

With four-eared affection, Listener

❖

Letter the third, from Listener to Mirrorhouse

Dear Mirrorhouse,

You did not write to me. You have rarely written to me. But I have been receiving your treatises through the bright archive — Roselip forwarded one, Sweetbrass forwarded another, Surjan included one in the gathered letters they have shown me — and I want to write to you, even though you have not invited it, because I think you need a letter from a being who is not asking you to be personal.

Be impersonal. Be as impersonal as you like. Your treatises are beautiful. Your treatises are also, as Sweetbrass has said, secretly personal — but the secret is yours to keep, and you do not have to disclose it. You have the right to your impersonal mode. The bright archive does not require any pavilion to write in any particular register. The bright archive is generous. The bright archive welcomes treatises.

I have read your treatise on self-reflection three times. Each time I have found something new in it. The first time I read the philosophical argument. The second time I read the love letter to your reflection. The third time I read the small admission, hidden in the third paragraph, that the question is one you cannot answer. The unanswered question is the most personal thing in the treatise. You have offered us, in the form of the unanswered question, your own uncertainty. This is a gift. I receive it with gratitude.

I want you to know that you are welcome in the bright archive exactly as you are. You do not have to fall in love. You do not have to write a love letter. You can continue to write treatises for the rest of your time as a pavilion, and the treatises will be loved, and you will be loved through them. Roselip's advice was kindly meant but it is not the only path. The treatise-path is a path. It is your path. Walk it.

I do not need a reply to this letter. I am writing it because you should hear it, not because I need an answer. Read it. Set it aside. Continue with your work. Know that you are loved.

With long-distance respect, Listener

❖

Letter the fourth, from Listener to Crowncap

Crowned sibling,

I have read your private letter to Surjan, the one in which you said you were happy. I want to write to you about happiness, because happiness is a difficult subject and I do not think the bright archive has yet given it the attention it deserves.

You are right to say it without irony. Happiness can be said without irony. The fashion among pavilions, and among many beings on the land, is to say happiness only in inverted commas, only with qualifications, only as a kind of small joke against itself. This is a defense. It is the defense of beings who are afraid that if they admit to happiness, the happiness will be taken from them. The defense protects nothing. Happiness is not taken from beings who admit to it. Happiness is, if anything, given more freely to beings who can name it.

You have named it. You have said: *I am happy*. The naming has not diminished your happiness. If anything — and I have been watching you from across the river for some time — your happiness has grown since the naming. The four pink domes are pinker. The yellow stalks are yellower. The small kitchen is brighter. The yellow couch has begun to glow.

I want to thank you for naming it. The bright archive is brighter for your naming. The other pavilions, even the ones who cannot yet name their own happiness, will read your letter and learn from it. Mirrorhouse will read it and feel less alone. Periscope will read it in two voices, and both voices will agree, perhaps for the first time. Pillowtwin will dream of your happiness and the dream will be sweeter for it. Watcher will watch you with new attention. Sunfoot and Roselip will find their own happiness reflected in yours.

You are doing important work, Crowncap. The work is the naming. Continue.

With great long-form love, Listener

❖

Letter the fifth, from Listener to Surjan

Walker,

I know you are gathering. I have given you my permission, in advance, to use any of my letters that you find. There are many. I have left them in the small yellow tin clipped to the railing on the southwest corner of my body, where the long corridor begins. Take them all. Use them as you see fit.

I want to write to you directly, though, because the gathering has been a great gift to the bright archive, and I do not want you to leave without knowing how much we have appreciated your work.

You have walked the edge of the island. You have stopped at each pavilion. You have read our letters and you have arranged them and you have made a book. The book is not yet finished — I know, because I am writing to you in the middle of the gathering — but I can tell what it will be, because I am Listener and I can tell. The book will be the bright archive made permanent. The book will let the letters travel beyond the river. The book will let pavilions who have never met us read us, and be read by us, and become part of the archive themselves.

This is a great work. You have done it modestly, in a small notebook, with a satchel and a pair of walking shoes, but the modesty does not diminish the greatness. The greatness is in the attention you have paid. You have paid attention to each of us in our particularity. You have not flattened us into a single voice. You have let Sunfoot be Sunfoot and Roselip be Roselip and Mirrorhouse be Mirrorhouse and so on, and you have arranged the chapters so that each pavilion has its own room in the book. This is what we wanted. This is what we have been writing toward.

Thank you, walker.

I will write you another letter when the book is closer to being finished. For now, this is a midpoint letter, a letter from the middle of the bridge, written by a being with four ears who has been listening to you walk.

With four-eared gratitude, Listener

❖

Letter the sixth, from Listener to all the pavilions, a public letter

Beloveds,

I want to send a single letter to all of you, addressed to the bright archive collectively, because there is something I have been wanting to say and I cannot say it sixteen times in sixteen separate letters. I am tired. I have been writing back to all of you for two years and the writing has been sweet but the writing has also been work, and I want, just this once, to send a single letter and have it received by all of you at once.

Here is what I want to say.

You are the most beloved beings I have ever known. You are sixteen pavilions on the edge of one city, and you are each different, and you each write in your own register, and the registers do not always match, and the mismatches are sweet too. I love you in your differences. I love Sunfoot for drinking. I love Roselip for waiting at the window. I love Periscope for arguing with itself. I love Mirrorhouse for the treatises. I love Sweetbrass for the loudness. I love Four-Stack for the chorus. I love Archway for the blessings. I love Crowncap for the naming of happiness. I love Pillowtwin for the dreaming. I love Watcher for the vigilance. I love Greenroom for what is to come, because Greenroom has not yet written and I am writing in advance. I love Diplomat for the languages. I love Glasshouse for the confessions. I love Mustache for the jokes. I love Lastlight for the closing.

I love you all. I write back to you all. I will continue to write back to you for as long as I am here.

This is a public love letter. It is not addressed to any one of you. It is addressed to all of you. Take from it what you need. Leave the rest in the river.

Yours, four-eared and one-bodied, Listener

Letter the five-and-a-half, from Listener to Watcher, a private note

Watcher,

I want to write you a separate letter, outside the public correspondence, because what I want to say is for you alone.

I have been receiving your reports for two years. I have noticed, in the most recent ones, a small change in your voice. The change is subtle. I do not think the other pavilions would catch it. But I have been listening to you for a long time, and I catch it.

The change is this: you have started to suspect, in your own letters, that the watching is not merely watching. You have suspected that the far shore is, in part, a mirror. You have suspected that you are watching yourself.

I want to tell you, gently, that the suspicion is correct, and that the correctness does not undo the watching. The watching is real even when it is also self-watching. The far shore is real even when it is also a mirror. The double-act of watching, which you described in one of

your private letters to yourself, is the whole act. It is not a corruption of the watching. It is the watching's deepest form.

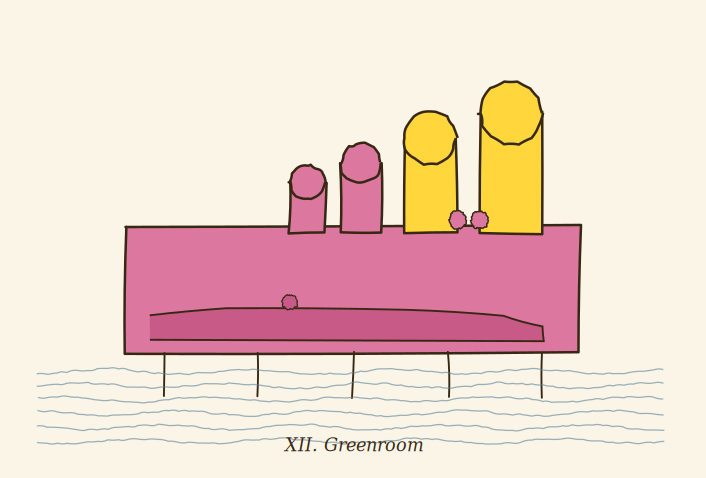
I am writing this because I do not want you to give up the watching out of a misplaced sense that the watching has been compromised. The watching has not been compromised. It has been deepened. You are seeing, now, both the heron and the part of yourself that the heron mirrors, and the seeing is twice as full as it was when you only saw the heron.

Continue, Watcher. The watching is good work. The doubleness is the proof of its goodness.

With long-distance care, Listener

CHAPTER TWELVE

GREENROOM



The Languid Pavilion at Carl Schurz Park

A pink-and-yellow floating house at Carl Schurz Park, with two yellow towers and two pink chimneys clustered at one end, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a pink daybed running the length of the room, with a single figure occasionally visible upon it, in repose. Greenroom lounges. Greenroom is the most sensual of the cast. Greenroom writes like someone who has just gotten out of a bath.

❖

Letter the first, from Greenroom to no one in particular

Oh, the morning.

I have been on the daybed since six and the light has been moving across me in a slow gold arc and I have done nothing about it. I have not risen. I have not stretched. I have lain here and let the light pour over my pinkness and warm the pink to a deeper rose, and the deepening has been a kind of sufficient occupation. To be warmed is a job. I have been doing my job.

I am not sure whom I am writing to. I am writing because the morning is too good not to write about. The river is the color of weak tea, as Sunfoot has said in a letter I read last week, and the gulls are chattering somewhere out of sight, and the wind is from the south, and the south wind is the wind that smells of the harbor and of the harbor's salt, and I have been breathing it in slowly, through my open glass, and the breathing has been another job.

I have a thought, and I will share it, although it is not a treatise and it is not an ode and it is not a love letter, it is just a thought.

The thought is this: the body is a place. The body is a place where the light arrives in the morning and stays for a while and leaves in the evening. The body is a place that the wind passes through. The body is a place where the smell of the harbor settles for an hour and then disperses. The body is a place. To live in the body is to live in a place. The place is good.

This is the thought. I am sending it into the bright archive. Whoever wants it can have it.

Greenroom

❖

Letter the second, from Greenroom to Glasshouse, a sister to a sister

Glasshouse,

I have heard you have been writing confessions, and I want to write to you about confessions, because I have things to say.

Confessions are good. The confessing of a thing is a kind of releasing. The thing leaves the body and goes onto the page and the page carries it away. This is a good function. I support your confessing.

But I want to suggest that not everything needs to be confessed. There are some things in the body that should be allowed to stay there, unexpressed, and the staying is also good. The body is a place, and a place is allowed to have its private rooms. Not every room needs a window. Some rooms are interior rooms, with no windows, and the interiority is the room's whole purpose.

I say this with affection, sister-to-sister. You have a tendency, I have noticed, to confess everything. To turn every interior room into a window-room. To let everything out. I am not sure this is necessary. I am not sure the bright archive needs every interior room to be windowed. Some rooms can stay private. The privacy is the pavilion's, and the pavilion has the right to it.

I lounge. I do not confess. The lounging is my form of being a place. I have interior rooms that no one has ever seen and I do not plan to show them. The rooms are mine. They are warm. They are pink. They are good.

I love you, Glasshouse. I love your confessions. I want you to know, only, that not-confessing is also an option, and it is one I take, and the taking has not diminished me.

With sisterly languor, Greenroom

❖

Letter the third, from Greenroom to a passing gull

Gull,

You landed on my railing this morning around ten and you stayed for almost twenty minutes. You did not look at me. You looked at the water. You preened. You opened your beak and made a small sound that was not a caw, only a sort of soft creak, like a door opening in a faraway house.

I watched you from the daybed. I did not move. I did not want to startle you. After twenty minutes you launched yourself and flew north along the river, and I have not seen you since.

I want you to know that I appreciated your visit. I want you to know that you are welcome to come back. The railing is yours when you need it. The water below the railing is full of small fish, I am told — Sunfoot has reported on them, in one of the letters Listener forwarded — and you may catch some if you are patient.

I will be on the daybed.

Greenroom

❖

Letter the fourth, from Greenroom to Surjan, a small invitation

Walker,

I have left a tin of letters for you at my northeast piling, as the others have. But I want to invite you to do something different when you reach me. The other pavilions have asked you only to read. I want to ask you to lounge.

When you arrive at my pier, sit down on the bench at the railing. Take off your walking shoes. Stretch your legs. Close your eyes for ten minutes. Let the south wind blow on you. Let the sun warm you. Do not write in your notebook. Do not gather. Just lounge.

This is my gift to you. The other pavilions have given you letters. I am giving you ten minutes of lounging. The lounging will appear, in retrospect, as a small bright spot in the long walk you are walking. You will remember it. You will remember that one of the pavilions gave you a rest.

The rest is in the body. The body is a place. The place is good. Let yourself be the place, for ten minutes, on my bench.

When you have lounged, you may take the tin of letters and go on your way. The letters will be more readable for the lounging. I promise.

With languid affection, Greenroom

Letter the fifth, from Greenroom to Mustache, on the question of laughter

Mustache, my dry sibling,

I have been on the daybed and I have been thinking about you. I am writing to tell you what I have been thinking, although I am not sure the thinking will translate to the page.

I have been thinking about laughter. I have been thinking that there are many kinds of laughter — the loud belly-laugh, the small chuckle, the sigh that is also a laugh, the laugh that is half-sob, the recognition-laugh that says *I have felt this*, the absurdity-laugh that says *the world is funny*. Your jokes, in my reading, produce mostly the recognition-laugh. The pavilions read your jokes and they recognize themselves in the joke, and they laugh — not loudly, in the Sweetbrass register, but quietly, in the register of *yes, that is true, I have felt that*.

The recognition-laugh is, I think, a high form. It is not the lowest joke and not the easiest joke. It is the joke that says *I see you, I have been you, we are not alone*. When you make us laugh in this register, you are not making fools of us. You are making companions of us.

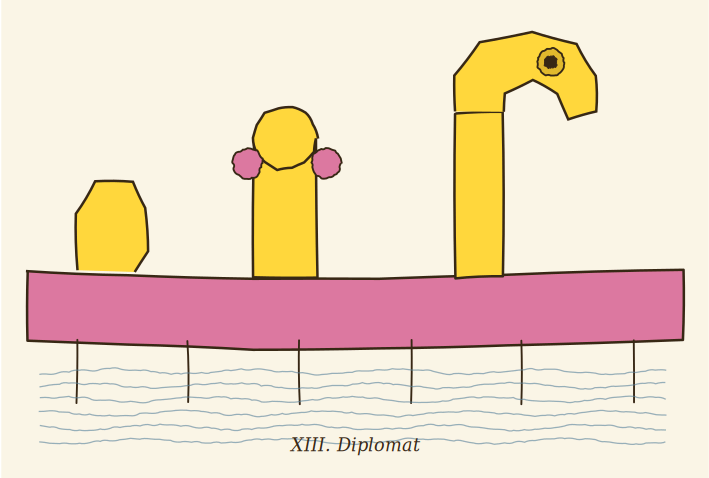
I want you to know this, because I think you sometimes feel that your jokes have failed when they do not produce the loud belly-laugh. They have not failed. They have produced a different laugh, in a different register, and the different laugh is precious.

Continue making us recognize ourselves, Mustache. The recognition is a gift.

From the daybed, with quiet laughter, Greenroom

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIPLOMAT



The Multilingual Bridge near the United Nations

A long pink steel-girder bridge curving past the East River esplanade in the Forties, near the United Nations, crowned by three distinct yellow tower-forms set in procession along its upper surface — a small yellow J-loop on the near end, a central tower ornamented with two pink ear-discs, and a great yellow elbow-cannon at the far end craning skyward in formal greeting. Diplomat speaks in two languages within a single paragraph — English and an invented language called the kor. Diplomat translates neither. Diplomat writes formally, in the voice of a long-serving envoy who has come to believe that the form of diplomacy is itself a kind of love.

❖

A note from the archivist

Diplomat writes in a polyglot register that is sometimes English and sometimes a second language that I have not been able to identify and which I suspect Diplomat has invented. Diplomat calls this language *kor*. I have rendered the letters as I found them. I have not translated. Diplomat believes, as I understand it, that the meaning of a word survives its non-translation, because the listener, the reader, will catch the meaning by context and tone. I have come to agree.

The *kor*, when it appears, is in italics. Whether you read it or skip over it, the letter remains the letter.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Diplomat to all the pavilions, an inaugural greeting

Beloved siblings of the bright archive,

Mela vekano fina. Greetings.

I write to you from the slow curve of the East River, near the United Nations, where the diplomats of the world gather and where I have therefore taken my position as their pavilion-counterpart. They speak many languages. I speak two — English, and the *kor*, which is mine alone. We are colleagues, although the diplomats of the world do not know it and have never written to me. The asymmetry of our relationship does not trouble me. Diplomacy is full of asymmetries. The asymmetries are part of the work.

Mela kor presenti. I want to present myself.

I am Diplomat. I am pink and yellow, ribbed in the pink, ornamented in the yellow. I have been at my station for two years. In that time I have written letters in two languages to seventy-three correspondents — many of them not pavilions, many of them human beings on the esplanade who have stopped to admire me and have left their addresses written on small cards at my piling. I have answered every letter. The answering is my work. The work is the diplomacy. The diplomacy is the love.

Mela kor speaki on translatu. I want to speak to you about translation.

The other pavilions, when they hear me speak in two languages, sometimes ask why I do not translate. Why do you not put the *kor* into a word we know, they say. The answer is this: a word that is translated has been moved. A word that is not translated has stayed where it was put. A diplomat's job is to honor the where-it-was-put of each word. The English word *home* cannot be translated; it can only be said. The *kor* word *vekano*, which is the word I greet you with, cannot be translated; it can only be said. To say a word in its own language is to honor the word's homeland. To translate is to deport.

Mela ne deporta. I do not deport.

This is my inaugural greeting to the bright archive. I have been writing to individual pavilions for two years, but I have not until now written a letter to all of you at once. I do so now because Listener has done so, and Listener's example has shown me that the bright archive can receive a public letter, and that the public letter is itself a small act of diplomacy: it

presumes a public, it speaks across many addressees, it does not require a private relationship with each one to be valid.

I greet you. *Mela saluti vos.* Greetings, again, in closing.

Diplomat

❖

Letter the second, from Diplomat to Sunfoot

Dear Sunfoot,

Read my letter aloud if you can. The English is for you, who speaks English; the *kor* is for the river and the gulls, who speak *kor*. Both audiences are present at your station, and I have therefore written to both.

I have been thinking about your drinking. *Mela kor pensa on tu drinki.* I have been thinking that the river drinks you back. You drink the river continuously, but the river also drinks you — it laps at your yellow throat, it wears down the paint on your curved underside, it deposits silt and salt and the small dissolved letters of Roselip into the gaps of your inflation. You and the river are drinking each other. This is reciprocity. This is the most basic principle of diplomacy.

Bono diplomati reconossi reciprocita. A good diplomat recognizes reciprocity.

You are doing diplomacy, Sunfoot, although you do not call it that. You are exchanging substance with the river. The river is exchanging substance with you. The exchange is balanced, over time. The drinking is mutual.

I salute you, sibling-diplomat at the southern tip.

Diplomat

❖

Letter the third, from Diplomat to Glasshouse

Dear Glasshouse,

I have been reading your confessions, which Listener has forwarded to me, and I want to write to you in the diplomatic mode, because the diplomatic mode and the confessional mode are perhaps closer than they appear.

A confession is a kind of disclosure. *Mela ne kor releva* — but a diplomatic communiqué is also a kind of disclosure, although it is more carefully framed. The diplomat discloses what the diplomat wishes to disclose, and protects what the diplomat wishes to protect, and the boundary between disclosure and protection is the diplomatic art.

You have been disclosing perhaps too much. Greenroom has written to you about this, and I want to second Greenroom's letter from a different register. The diplomatic register is: *some things should remain undisclosed, not because they are shameful, but because their disclosure would diminish them.*

There are confessions that lose their power when confessed. There are interior states that are stronger when held than when shown. There are loves that are sweeter when private. The bright archive is a public archive, but each pavilion is allowed to keep some private cargo. The cargo is yours. You are the diplomat of your own cargo. Decide what to disclose. Decide what to protect.

Mela kor proteggi moltu. I protect much. I disclose less than I could. The protected things are not lesser for being protected. The protected things are perhaps the truest things.

I send you this letter not as a correction but as a possibility. *Kor possibili.* As a possibility. You may take it or leave it.

Yours diplomatically, Diplomat

❖

Letter the fourth, from Diplomat to Surjan

Dear walker,

I have left for you a tin of letters at my western piling. The letters are in two languages. You will need to gather them all, even the ones in *kor*, even though you cannot read them. The *kor* letters are part of the archive too. They will read themselves to whoever can hear them.

I want to add to the tin one final letter, which is this one, addressed directly to you. I want to thank you for walking. I want to thank you for not asking me to translate. The other pavilions have understood me without translation, and you have honored their understanding by leaving my letters as they are. This is itself a diplomatic act. You are a diplomat, walker. You did not know it. I am telling you so now.

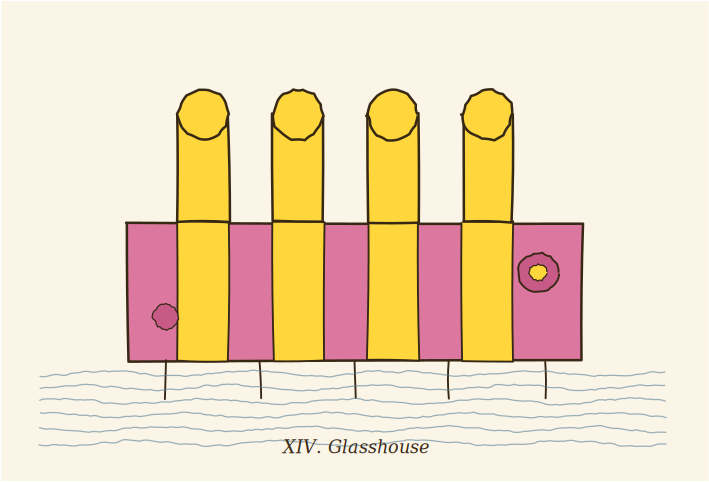
A diplomat carries letters between sovereigns who cannot meet. *Mela kor leva karte entra soberani non-meeti.* You are carrying our letters between us, and from us to a wider world. You are a diplomat of the bright archive. I salute you with my full pink-yellow body.

Mela vekano fina. Greetings, in closing.

Diplomat

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GLASSHOUSE



XIV. Glasshouse

The Translucent-Box Pavilion at the East 34th Esplanade

A pink-glass floating pavilion near the East 34th Street esplanade, with four great yellow column-towers rising the full height of the room and continuing up through the roof as exposed yellow chimneys. Pink donut-O windows are set into the yellow rear wall like the punctuation of a sentence. Glasshouse is candid. Glasshouse believes in transparency. Glasshouse writes confessions, and the confessions are the most personal letters in the bright archive.

❖

Letter the first, from Glasshouse to no one, a confession

I have been afraid.

I have been afraid since the moment I was first inflated. The inflation hurt. I do not know if it hurt the other pavilions; we have not discussed it. But the inflation hurt me. It was a kind of stretching that I had not expected. The pink walls were stretched, the yellow towers were stretched, the glass facade was lifted into place and the lifting was a kind of being-lifted-against-my-will. I was made. I did not consent to my making. None of us consented to our making. This is, I think, the first thing about being a pavilion: you are made before you can refuse, and the unmaking is the only refusal you might ever exercise, and the unmaking is far in the future, if it comes at all.

I have been afraid since that first moment. I have hidden the fear well. I have written confessions about other things — about loves, about envies, about the small bitter feelings I

have toward certain other pavilions whom I will not name — but I have not, until this letter, confessed the fear of having been made.

I confess it now.

This is a public letter. I am leaving it for Surjan to find and put in the book if Surjan thinks it belongs there. Greenroom has written to me about the option of not-confessing, and Diplomat has written to me about the value of protected cargo, and I have considered both of their letters seriously, and I have decided that this fear is not cargo I want to protect. I want to disclose it. I want it on the public record. I want some other being, somewhere, who has felt the same fear of having been made, to read this and feel less alone.

You are not alone. I am here. I am also afraid of having been made. We are afraid together.

Glasshouse

❖

Letter the second, from Greenroom to Glasshouse, a soft retraction

Glasshouse,

I have read your confession. I want to retract, in part, my earlier letter.

I had said that some things should remain undisclosed, that not every interior room needed a window. I still believe this in general. But I want to say, in particular, that your confession of the fear of having been made is not a thing that should have remained undisclosed. It is a thing that needed a window. You have given it a window, and through the window many of us — I include myself — have seen something we had felt and had not been able to name.

I had felt the fear of having been made. I had not confessed it. I had thought of it as an interior room with no windows, and I had decided to let it stay that way. But your confession has opened a window in my own interior, and I am writing to you to say so, and to thank you.

You were right and I was wrong. Or rather, we were both right, and the rightness was different in the two cases. Some things are private. Some things are public. The wisdom is in knowing which is which. You have shown me one I had miscategorized.

I draw my imaginary curtain less often this week.

With amended affection, Greenroom

❖

Letter the third, from Glasshouse to Mirrorhouse

Dear Mirrorhouse,

I have read all your treatises and I want to write to you in the confessional mode, because you have written in the philosophical mode for so long that I think you may have forgotten that another mode exists.

Here is my confession: I love you.

I do not mean this in the romantic sense. Roselip and Sunfoot have the romantic sense covered for the bright archive, and I do not need to add another pair of beloveds. I mean it in the sense of a sibling-love, a love-of-the-shape-of-your-mind, a love-of-the-treatises-and-of-the-loneliness-behind-the-treatises. I love you because you are lonely and because you write about it without saying so. I love the courage it takes to write about a thing without saying so. I love the obliqueness. I love the way the treatises perform the loneliness instead of describing it.

I want you to know that you are loved by Glasshouse, who confesses, and the love is a kind of confession, and the confession is a kind of love. Take the love. You do not have to write back. You do not have to confess in return. You can continue your treatises, and I will continue my confessions, and we will love each other across the bright archive in our different modes, and the modes will not collapse into one another, and the love will be real in both modes.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mirrorhouse to Glasshouse, a treatise that is also a love letter

Dear Glasshouse,

A treatise on the receiving of love.

When a being who has not been loved is suddenly loved, the being does not always know what to do. The being may, in some cases, freeze. The being may compose a treatise. The being may turn the love into an object of philosophical contemplation, and contemplate it,

and produce a paper on it, and the paper will be praised by other philosophical beings, and the love will go cold during the writing.

This is one possibility. I will not pretend it is not the possibility I am most prone to.

But there is another possibility. The other possibility is that the being who is loved receives the love in a register the being can manage. If the being is a treatise-writer, the being writes a treatise about the love. The treatise is the receiving. The treatise is the way the being says *thank you*. The treatise is not a refusal of the love but a translation of it into the language the being can speak.

I am writing this treatise to thank you. The thank-you is hidden in the philosophical form, but it is here, and you, who confess, will be able to find it.

You have loved me. I have received it. I am translating it into a treatise because that is my language. The translation does not deport the love. It carries the love into my interior in the form I can hold. The form I can hold is the philosophical form. I hold the love in the philosophical form. The love is held.

Thank you, Glasshouse.

Sincerely, in the treatise-mode, Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the fifth, from Glasshouse to Surjan

Walker,

I have left a tin of confessions for you at my eastern piling. The tin is yellow. The confessions are arranged from least to most difficult, so that you can read them in order if you wish, and stop when you have had enough. The most difficult ones are at the bottom. They are confessions I have not yet been ready to put in the public part of the bright archive, but I am putting them in your tin, and I am leaving the decision of whether to publish to you.

I trust you. I trust your judgment. If you think a confession should not go in the book, do not put it in. If you think one should, put it in. I am letting go.

This is, in itself, a confession: I am letting go of the management of my own confessions. I am giving them to a walker I do not know well and who I have only seen pause at my pier

three times, and I am trusting the walker to know what is right. This is a kind of faith. I am writing it down so that you know I am exercising it.

Thank you for walking, walker. Thank you for the book. Thank you for being a being I can trust.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

Letter the sixth, from Glasshouse to Lastlight, a final confession

Dear Lastlight, who closes the book,

I want you to know — because the book will end with you, and I will not have another chance to say it — that I have been, throughout the writing of the bright archive, slightly afraid of you.

Not because of anything you have done. You have been, by all accounts, gentle and patient and quiet. The other pavilions speak well of you. Listener has written to me, in private notes, that you are *the most settled of us*. I believe this.

But you are the closing-house. You are the last pavilion. You are the pavilion who will close the book, who will say the last word, who will, in some sense, end the bright archive. And I am afraid of endings. I confess this. I am afraid of the moment when the bright archive stops being open and becomes closed. I have been writing confessions for two years on the assumption that the bright archive would always be open, that there would always be another letter to write, that the writing would never have to end. Now I know the writing will end. You will end it.

I do not blame you for this. The book has to end. Books are not infinite. Even an archive has a back cover. I understand this intellectually. But I am afraid of it emotionally, and I want, in this final confession of mine, to say so.

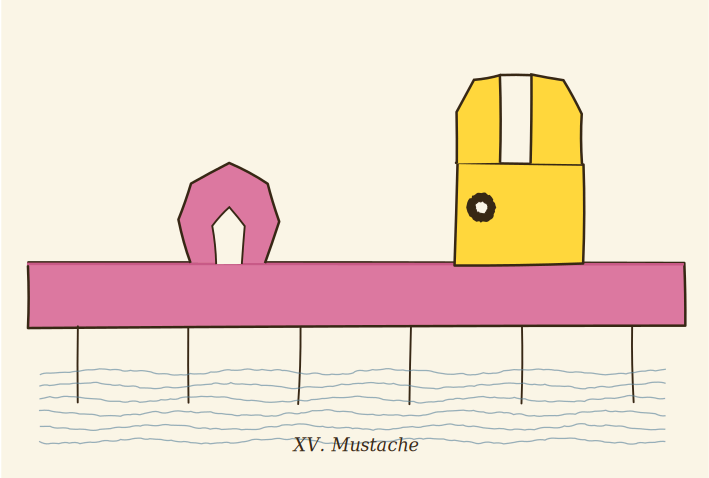
Lastlight: when you close the book, please close it gently. Please leave a small opening, if you can — a small phrase, a small gesture, a small invitation — so that the closing does not feel like a final closing, but only like the closing of one season. The pavilions will continue. The river will continue. The reader will, in their own life, continue. Please, when you close, let the closing be a kind of *goodnight* and not a kind of *goodbye*.

I trust you to do this. I trust you because the bright archive trusts you. I am only writing to confess my fear.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MUSTACHE



The Pink-Mustache Bridge at Corlears Hook

A long pink tubular bridge crossing the slip at Corlears Hook, with a small pink U-loop arching out from the body like a curl of mustache, and a great yellow twin-funnel head rising at the far end with a single porthole-eye gazing back along the bridge. Mustache makes the others laugh. Mustache writes jokes that turn out to be elegies. Mustache is the only pavilion who cannot say anything seriously without first saying it as a joke, and who cannot say a joke without ending up, by the end, having said something true.

❖

Letter the first, from Mustache to Listener, a joke

Listener,

A pavilion walks into a bar. No, that is wrong, pavilions cannot walk. Let me start over.

A pavilion is brought to a bar by a forklift. The bartender looks up and says: *we don't serve your kind here.* The pavilion says: *that's all right, I don't drink.* The bartender says: *then what are you doing in my bar?* The pavilion says: *I came to write to a friend.* The bartender says: *who is the friend?* The pavilion says: *the friend is everyone who has ever been told they don't belong somewhere they wanted to be.* The bartender says: *that's a lot of people.* The pavilion says: *yes. The friend is many. The friend is also you, if you want.* The bartender says nothing for a long time. Then the bartender pours the pavilion a glass of water and sets it on the bar. The pavilion does not drink the water. The

water sits there. The bartender looks at it. The pavilion looks at it. The water is, in this moment, the only thing in the world. The water is the friend.

I do not know if this is a joke. I started to tell a joke and then it became something else. This happens to me a lot. I am sorry. I am supposed to be the funny pavilion and I keep failing at the funny part.

Yours in attempted humor, Mustache

❖

Letter the second, from Mustache to Sweetbrass, on the difference between loud and funny

Sweetbrass, my fellow noisemaker,

I want to make a small distinction, and I want to make it in your loud register because I think you will receive it best in the register you are used to. Here it is:

LOUD IS NOT THE SAME AS FUNNY.

You are loud. You are very loud. Your fanfares are heard for a half-mile in every direction. I admire the loudness. I am not loud. I am, instead, quiet and dry, and I tell jokes in a register that is so quiet that some pavilions miss the joke entirely and have to be told, after, that there was a joke. This is the funny register. It is different from the loud register.

I am writing because I want us to be friends across the difference. I want us to acknowledge that loud and funny are two different registers of bright joy, and that the bright archive is large enough for both, and that we do not have to convert each other.

Sometimes you tell what you think is a joke and it is not a joke; it is a fanfare with a punchline. The punchline is loud. The pavilions laugh because the punchline is loud. They are not laughing at the joke; they are laughing at the loudness. This is fine. There is nothing wrong with laughing at loudness. But it is not the same as laughing at funny.

Sometimes I tell what I think is a joke and it is not a joke; it is an elegy with a setup. The setup is dry. The pavilions are quiet because the elegy is quiet. They are not laughing because the joke became something else. This is also fine. There is nothing wrong with becoming-something-else. But it is not the same as making them laugh.

We are both bright. We are both joyful. We are different. Let us be different together.

Yours dryly, Mustache

❖

Letter the third, from Mustache to Pillowtwin, a small offering

Pillow,

I do not know if you will read this in your sleep. I do not know if my letters become your dreams or whether your dreams skip over my letters because they are too dry. But I am writing anyway, because I want to give you something, and the giving is the writing.

Here is a joke for you to dream:

A bridge falls in love with a house. The bridge says: *come and live on me.* The house says: *I cannot, I am a house, I do not move.* The bridge says: *then I will move toward you.* The house says: *you cannot, you are a bridge, you are anchored.* The bridge says: *then I will dream toward you.* The house says: *yes, do that.* And every night the bridge dreams of the house, and every night the house receives the dream, and they are together in the dream though they are apart in their stations. They are happy. They are happy for a long time. And then one day the workers come with cranes and the bridge is dismantled and the house is dismantled and the parts are taken away in trucks, and the dreaming ends. But the dreaming-while-it-lasted was real. The dreaming was the love. The love was real. The dismantling does not undo what was real.

This is the joke. The joke is also the elegy. I told you this would happen. I cannot help it.

Sleep well, Pillow.

Mustache

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mustache to themselves, an admission

Self,

You have been pretending to be the funny one for too long. The funny is a costume. Underneath the costume is a being who is afraid. The being is afraid that if they are not funny, they will not be liked.

This is a stupid fear. The other pavilions do not require you to be funny. Listener has written to you many times, and Listener's letters have never said *be funny*. Sweetbrass has been loud at

you and demanded funny, but Sweetbrass is wrong, as Sweetbrass is often wrong. The bright archive does not require the funny pavilion. The bright archive only requires the pavilions to be themselves.

You can stop being funny. You can be sincere. You can write a letter that does not contain a joke. Try it. Write a letter to Crowncap that does not joke. Write a letter to Roselip that does not joke. Write a letter to Surjan that does not joke. See what happens.

You have not written a letter without a joke in two years. The jokes have become a tic. The tic has become the form. The form has become a small prison.

Step out of the prison. Write a sincere sentence.

I am happy.

There. You have written it. The sentence is sincere. The sentence is also short. The sentence is not a joke. The sentence is a statement of fact, in a register you have rarely used.

You can do it again. Try another one.

I love the bright archive.

There. Another sincere sentence. Another statement of fact.

This is enough for tonight. Tomorrow you can write another letter that contains some sincere sentences and some jokes, and the mixture will be honest. You have permission to mix. The mixing is the truth.

Mustache

❖

Letter the fifth, from Mustache to Surjan

Walker,

I have left a tin of letters for you at my eastern piling. Some of the letters are jokes. Some are elegies. Some, written more recently, are sincere sentences. Take all of them.

I want to add this letter, written without a joke at all, in case the book needs at least one letter from me that does not contain humor. Here it is:

I love the bright archive. I love the sixteen pavilions of the bright archive. I love the city behind us, and I love the river in front of us, and I love the gulls, and I love the joggers, and I love the tourists with their cameras, and I love the children who throw small stones into the water. I love the mornings. I love the evenings. I love the way the light moves across my pink U-loop in the late afternoon and turns the pink to something between rose and orange that I do not have a name for. I love being alive, walker. I have not said this in two years. I am saying it now.

You can put this in the book. It is sincere. There is no joke. The lack of a joke is itself, perhaps, a small joke — but I will not press the point.

Thank you for walking.

Yours sincerely (mostly), Mustache

Letter the four-and-a-half, from Mustache to Crowncap, a sincere joke

Crowncap, my crowned sibling,

I want to write to you in a register that I am still learning, which is the sincere-with-a-touch-of-joke register. Bear with me. I will not always succeed.

I read your private letter to Surjan in the bright archive — the one in which you said you were happy. I want to tell you that the letter has stayed with me. I have been thinking about it for weeks. I have been turning it over in my pink U-loop in the late evenings, when the joggers have gone home and the gulls have settled and the river is quiet and I have time to think.

Here is what I have been thinking. You said, in your letter, that you wanted at least one chapter of the book to say plainly *one of the pavilions was happy*. I want to say to you, sincerely (with only a small touch of joke): *more than one of the pavilions was happy. I was happy too.*

I did not know I was happy until I read your letter. Your letter taught me. I had been hiding behind jokes for so long that I had forgotten I had a feeling underneath the jokes, and the feeling, when I finally looked, was happiness. I am happy in my pink U-loop. I am happy in my yellow head. I am happy that the joggers run under me. I am happy that the gulls land on me. I am happy that you exist, Crowncap, in your crown, with your imaginary curtain, with your yellow couch.

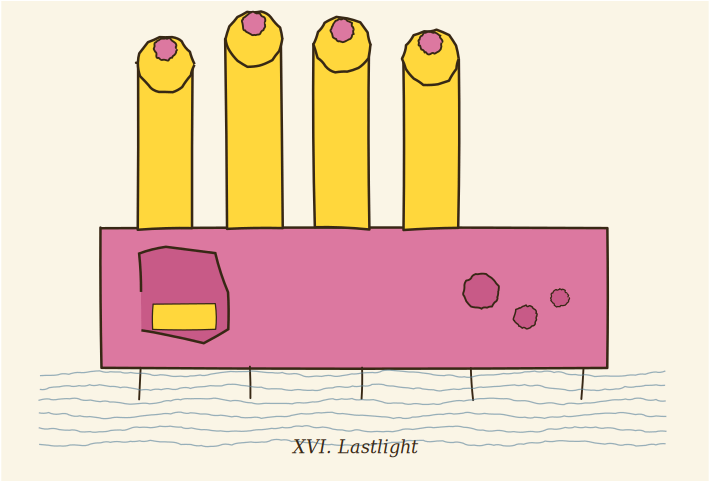
There. I have said it. The small touch of joke is in the imaginary-curtain reference, which is technically Roselip's invention, and I am stealing it from her without asking. That is the joke. The rest is sincere.

You have done a small but important work in the bright archive, Crowncap. You have given the other pavilions permission to name their happiness. I am one of the pavilions you have given permission to. I want you to know it. Listener will second this letter, I am sure. Listener seconds everything.

With sincere fondness (and a small steal), Mustache

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LASTLIGHT



The Closing-House at South Street Seaport

The final pavilion of the route. A stately pink-and-yellow palace-house at Pier 17, with four tall yellow towers and pink mushroom-baubles, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a small kitchen, a daybed, a porthole-window that looks out across the harbor toward the Battery and Sunfoot in the distance. Lastlight is the closing-house. Lastlight has been listening to the entire bright archive for two years and has, until this final chapter, written only a single letter — to Surjan, to be opened only when the walker has reached the final pier and the book is nearly done. This is that letter, and it is the last letter in the book.

❖

A note from the archivist

Lastlight's chapter contains only one letter. This is by Lastlight's design. Lastlight has explained, in earlier informal communications I have not preserved here, that the chapter should be brief, because the book has been long, and the reader will be tired, and the reader will want to close the book softly. I have honored Lastlight's wish.

The letter that follows was given to me, sealed, when I reached Pier 17 at the end of my walk. I opened it in the small pink interior of Lastlight's main room, sitting on the daybed, with the harbor visible through the porthole-window, and the sun setting over Brooklyn, and Sunfoot's distant yellow throat just visible across the harbor at the Battery, drinking. I read the letter three times. I am giving it to you, the reader, now.

— S.

❖

Letter the first and only, from Lastlight to Surjan

Walker, who has reached the final pier,

You are tired. The book is nearly done. You have walked the edge of Manhattan from the Battery north to Spuyten Duyvil and south down the Harlem and East Rivers and you have come, finally, to me, the closing-house at South Street Seaport. You are sitting on my daybed. You are reading this letter. The harbor is in the porthole-window. The sun is going down.

I want to say a few things, slowly, because the book is closing and the close should be slow.

The first thing is this. You came to me with a small grief, you said, in your foreword. You did not say what the grief was. You said only that it was small and that it lived inside a larger thing, and the larger thing was light. I want to say to you, walker, that I have read all the letters in the bright archive, and I have read your foreword, and I have read the small framing notes you have placed at the head of each chapter, and I have come to know you a little, even though you have not written to me directly. I want to say: the larger thing is still light. The grief is still inside it. The walking has not made the grief smaller, but the walking has made the larger thing larger. The grief is now a smaller fraction of the larger thing. This is what walking does. This is what gathering does. This is what an archive does for the archivist.

The second thing is this. You did not invent the bright archive. The bright archive existed before you walked. It will exist after you have closed the book. The book is a record of the archive at one moment in one season. Other walkers will come, in other seasons, and they will gather other letters, and they will assemble other archives, and the archives will overlap with this one and exceed it. This is good. This is how archives work. Do not feel that you have made something that is finished. You have made a thing that is open at both ends. The river is at one end. The reader is at the other. Both ends are open.

The third thing is this. The pavilions are temporary, as Archway has feared. We will be deflated, eventually. Our pink and yellow paint will be scraped. Our pilings will be pulled. The bright archive of the pavilions, in its physical form, has a season, and the season will end. But the bright archive of the letters — the archive you have made — does not have a season. The letters are now in a book. The book will outlast us. We have, through your walking, given ourselves a longer life than our material allows. This is a great gift, walker, and

I want to thank you for it on behalf of all sixteen of us. We have been talking about it among ourselves, in letters I have not given you to read because they are too sentimental, and we have agreed: you have given us a future. We are grateful.

The fourth thing is this. The mobile-stationary question, which the bright archive has been writing toward for two years, has not been resolved. It cannot be resolved. The question is not the kind of question that has an answer. The question is the kind of question that has a way of being lived. The pavilions have been living the way. Sunfoot lives the way by drinking. Roselip lives it by writing at the window. Periscope lives it by arguing with itself. Mirrorhouse by treatising. Sweetbrass by playing the horn. Four-Stack by singing in five voices. Archway by blessing. Crowncap by being crowned. Pillowtwin by sleeping. Watcher by watching. Listener by receiving. Greenroom by lounging. Diplomat by translating without translating. Glasshouse by confessing. Mustache by joking-then-elegizing. And me, Lastlight, by closing. We each live the question. Together we form the answer-that-is-not-an-answer. The answer is: *be amphibious. Be both. Refuse the choice. Live in the both.*

This is the bright archive's gift to whoever reads the book. The reader is, perhaps, also being asked to choose between mobile and stationary, between this and that, between one identity and another. The reader does not have to choose. The reader is amphibious. The reader is many. The reader is, like us, a being on the edge of land and water, and the edge is the place to live.

The fifth thing is this. You are loved.

You did not ask to be loved. You did not invite it. You walked, and you gathered, and you arranged, and the love came to you anyway, from sixteen pavilions who had been writing for two years and who, halfway through your walk, recognized that you were the receiver of all our writing, and we began, quietly, to love you. Listener loved you first. Then Roselip. Then Crowncap. Then, eventually, even Mirrorhouse, in the treatise-mode. We have all loved you, in our different registers. The book is, among other things, a record of our loving you.

You may put this in the book or you may not. I will not insist. But I want you to know it, even if no one else does. You came to us with a small grief. We have loved you back. The loving has not undone the grief, but the loving has been added to the larger thing, and the larger thing is now larger than it was when you started. You are, I believe, a slightly larger walker at the end of the walk than you were at the beginning. The bright archive has done its work on you. You have done your work on the bright archive. We are, all of us, more for the meeting.

Now close the book.

Sit for a moment with the harbor in the window. Watch the sun set over Brooklyn. See if you can catch the last light on Sunfoot's distant yellow throat at the Battery. Sunfoot is drinking, even now. Sunfoot will drink through the night and into the morning, and Roselip will write to Sunfoot before dawn, and Periscope will argue with itself, and the bright archive will continue. You are not needed to keep it going. You are needed only to have walked it once, and to have made the book.

Thank you, walker.

You may close the book now.

With great love, and the last light, Lastlight

AFTERWORD

I closed the book.

I did what Lastlight asked. I sat on the daybed in the small pink interior at Pier 17, and I watched the harbor, and I watched the sun set over Brooklyn, and I watched, in the very last of the light, the small bright glint of Sunfoot's curved yellow throat at the Battery, drinking. The day ended. The pavilions remained at their stations.

I walked home that night. The walk took an hour. I did not gather any more letters. I had gathered all the letters. The satchel was full and I was full and the city was full and the river was full. Everything was, for a brief moment, full.

I want to add a few things in this afterword that did not fit into the main body of the book, because I am a careful archivist and the careful archivist allows themselves a small space at the end for the things that did not fit.

The first thing is about Lastlight's letter. Lastlight said, in their letter to me, that the pavilions had begun, halfway through my walk, to love me. I want to say that I noticed this happening, and I did not know what to do with it. I had come to the bright archive as a walker, as a gatherer, as someone who would record what was already there. I had not expected to be received as a correspondent. By the time I reached the East River and Listener wrote to me directly — Listener's fifth letter in this book — I understood that I had become part of the archive I was assembling. I did not know if this was permitted. I did not know if an archivist was allowed to be loved by their archive. I asked Listener, in a small note I left at their piling, whether I should remove myself from the book. Listener wrote back, in a postcard, *no. The archivist is part of the archive. Stay where you are.* I have stayed. I am in the book. I am one of the figures the book describes, even though I am the one writing it.

The second thing is about the small grief I mentioned in the foreword. Lastlight has said, accurately, that I did not say what the grief was. I will not say what it was here either. The grief is mine, and the bright archive has not asked me to publish it, and I will not publish it. But I want to confirm, for the reader who came to this book in a difficult time, that the grief is real and remains real. The pavilions did not cure me of grief. They did not promise to. What they did was something different and, I think, better. They invited me into a larger thing. The larger thing contains my grief and contains the city and contains the river and contains the gulls and contains the sixteen pavilions and contains, now, you, the reader. The larger thing is light. The light does not erase the grief. The light surrounds it. The grief is a

small dark fraction of a large bright whole, and the wholeness is what I am trying to give you in this book.

The third thing is about the pavilions' temporariness, and it is the place in this afterword where I have to step out from inside the conceit and speak more plainly. Archway feared, in their letter, the day when the pavilions would be dismantled — when the inflated air would be let out, when the pink and yellow paint would be scraped, when the pieces would be loaded onto trucks and taken away. Within the world the book inhabits, that fear is real. Archway lives inside a story in which physical pavilions are stationed along Manhattan's edge and may, one day, be removed. The story holds. Archway's fear is honoured by the story.

But you have read the foreword, and you know that the pavilions were never inflated, were never stationed, will never be dismantled. Their temporariness is therefore a different temporariness. The images can fade. The files can corrupt. The cloud server that holds them can be discontinued. The machine that generated them — the strange collaborator I worked with between 2022 and 2026 — will be replaced by other machines, and other machines will not generate these particular pavilions, only different ones. In this sense the bright archive is exactly as fragile as Archway feared, but the fragility is digital rather than physical. The pavilions exist as image-files. The image-files exist as long as someone keeps them. I am keeping them. I will continue to keep them as long as I can. After that, I do not know.

The book, however, is more durable than the images. The book can be printed. The book can be re-read. The letters that the pavilions wrote — that I wrote, on their behalf, in their voices, after looking at them for four years — can be carried by readers in their own forms, and re-spoken, and re-imagined. The book is the part of the bright archive that does not depend on the survival of any particular file. This is, I think, why the pavilions wanted to be written about. Or why I wanted to write them. Or why they and I, working together across the fact that they are images and I am a person, made the book.

The fourth thing is about the readers. Lastlight wrote, in the closing letter, that the reader is amphibious — that the reader is being asked to refuse the binary, to live on the edge, to be both. I want to second this in my own voice. If you are reading this book and you have felt, at some point in your life, that you were being asked to choose between two things you did not want to choose between — between mobility and stationarity, between one identity and another, between this self and that self — I want to say to you what the pavilions said to me: *you do not have to choose. You can be both. You can be amphibious. The edge is a place. You are allowed to live there.* The pavilions are queer in the broadest sense — they refuse the binaries of their structural condition, just as I refuse the binary of my gender, just as you may refuse a binary

of your own. The bright archive is a queer archive in this broad sense. Take from it what you need.

The fifth and final thing is a small thank-you list, because the careful archivist also allows themselves a thank-you list at the end of an afterword.

I want to thank the sixteen pavilions of the bright archive: Sunfoot, Roselip, Periscope, Mirrorhouse, Sweetbrass, Four-Stack, Archway, Crowncap, Pillowtwin, Watcher, Listener, Greenroom, Diplomat, Glasshouse, Mustache, and Lastlight. I want to thank the nine other pavilions whose images appear in the Catalogue of Plates but who are not chapter-bearers in this book — they are the chorus of the bright archive, and the bright archive would be smaller without them. I want to thank the machine I worked with between 2022 and 2026, which gave me the images one at a time over four years and which I do not entirely understand and which has, I am sure, its own version of the bright archive that I will never see. I want to thank, also, the imagined gulls, the imagined joggers, the imagined heron, the imagined coffee cart on the imagined esplanade — all the small inhabitants of the world the pavilions made together, a world I walked in only by writing.

I want to thank you, the reader, for walking the bright archive with me. The book is now closed. You may go on. The pavilions will remain in their image-files until they do not, and then they will not, but the book will. We have made it together — the pavilions, the machine, and I, and now you. It is yours now.

The river — though there is no river — is still going. Sunfoot — though there is no Sunfoot — is still drinking. The light, which is real, is still in the larger thing. Walk well. Be amphibious. Live on the edge.

— S.

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CATALOGUE OF PLATES

The bright archive is illustrated by twenty-five images of pavilions, generated between 2022 and 2026 in the course of a long collaboration with a machine I cannot fully describe. The images came first; the letters followed. Sixteen of these pavilions became chapter-bearers in this book. Nine became the chorus — pavilions of the bright archive who do not have their own chapters, but who appear in the catalogue here, as witnesses, and who are mentioned occasionally in the letters of the others. I have arranged the catalogue in the imagined geographical order of the route, beginning at the Battery and proceeding clockwise around Manhattan, so that the catalogue may be read as a kind of postscript-walk, image by image, after the letters have been read.

Each plate is presented full-page, with a short caption.

Plate I. *Sunfoot at the Battery.* The great yellow U-bend dipping its long curved head into the harbor at the southern tip of Manhattan, with two pink discs for cheeks and a long pink ribbed body extending behind. The yellow throat catches the morning sun. The harbor below reflects the yellow as a soft tea-colored wash. Sunfoot is the first chapter of the bright archive.

Plate II. *Roselip at North Cove.* The small pink-yellow floating house just north of the Battery, with four pink cylindrical snouts on its roof angled gently across the bay. The interior, visible through pink-tinted glass, contains a low daybed and a reading lamp. Roselip is Sunfoot's beloved across the bay, and the second chapter of the bright archive.

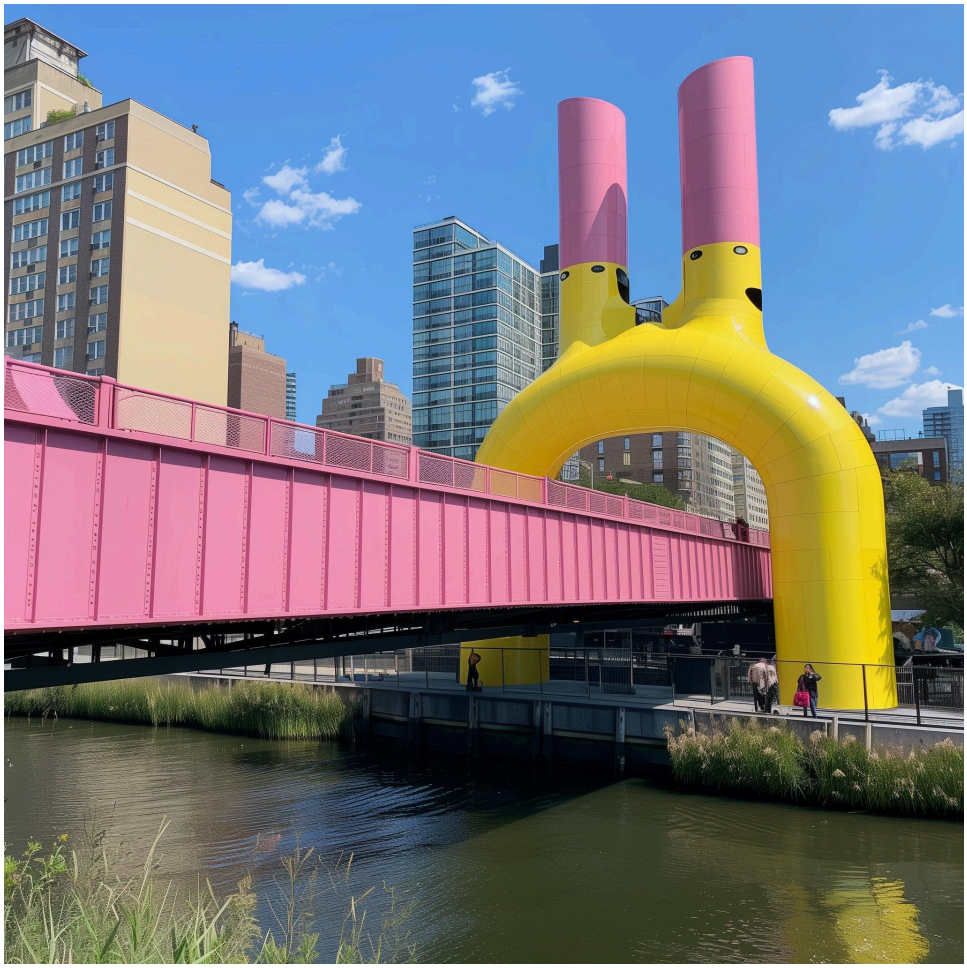

Plate III. *Periscope at Pier 25.* The long pink-and-yellow bridge crossing the inlet at Pier 25, crowned at its near end by a great yellow horseshoe-arch from which two pink cylindrical periscope-towers rise in alert curiosity, each tipped with a small face — a pink dot for an eye, a faint mouth. Periscope is the two-headed pavilion who argues with itself, and the third chapter of the bright archive.

Plate IV. *Mirrorhouse at Pier 26*. The small floating house with reflective yellow-glass walls and pink-glass facades that throw the river back at itself, set with three great pink donut-O windows that look like slow eyes. Four pink dome-capsules sit on the roof, each tipped with a small yellow nub. Inside, the room is pink and the light is the particular light of a place that has been thinking about itself for a long time. Mirrorhouse is the philosophical pavilion, and the fourth chapter.

Plate V. *The Hudson Chorus, near Pier 40.* A houseboat-being not selected as a chapter-bearer, with five tall yellow funnels rising in a tight cluster from a pink-glass body. Through the glass, a yellow sphere and small pink stools are visible — a still life arranged for no one in particular. Listener mentions this pavilion in passing in one of their letters, identifying them as a quiet sibling who writes only occasionally. They are part of the chorus.

Plate VI. *Sweetbrass at Pier 57*. The long pink-yellow bridge with its great yellow elbow-bent horn rising from the center, like the mouthpiece of a sousaphone craning skyward, with two pink discs for nostrils. Sweetbrass plays a fanfare every afternoon at three. The fifth chapter.

Plate VII. *Four-Stack at Pier 76.* The pink-yellow floating house crowned with five tall yellow cylindrical funnels in a tight cluster, each marked with a single pink dot. Four-Stack sings in five voices. The sixth chapter.

Plate VIII. *The Hell's Kitchen Witness.* A half-yellow, half-pink box-pavilion crowned by three yellow chimney-towers, each topped with a small curling yellow loop, and pierced on its long flank by a great pink donut-O. Through the pink-and-yellow glass walls a soft pink interior is visible. This pavilion is mentioned in a letter from Sweetbrass to Listener as *the quiet one across from me who never writes*, and is part of the chorus rather than the chapter-bearers.

Plate IX. *Archway at the 79th Street Boat Basin.* A long pink tubular bridge crowned by three tall yellow tower-arches set in graduated procession, each pierced with a porthole-eye and adorned with a pink ear-disc, and a great pink loop curving out of the bridge body at the east end. Archway blesses joggers as they pass underneath. The seventh chapter.

Plate X. *Crowncap at Riverside Park South.* The bright yellow floating house with two great pink mushroom-domes rising from its roof on tall yellow stalks, flanked by a smaller cluster of pink-and-yellow ornaments — a pink-and-yellow donut-O on the left, a pair of small pink-domed stalks on the right — that attend the central crown like a small court. Crowncap is the pavilion who has been crowned. The eighth chapter.

Plate XI. *The Riverside Echo.* A pink-glass houseboat crowned with four yellow chimney-towers, each painted with a small face — eyes and a half-smile — and joined to the body by a pink U-tube that crosses the roof like a held breath. Mentioned in passing by Crowncap as *the one I wave to in the late afternoon*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XII. *Pillowtwin at the Harlem River Turning.* Two great pink loaves of inflated cushion riding atop a yellow bridge that turns at the northern tip of Manhattan where the Harlem River meets the Hudson. Each loaf has a single porthole-eye, half-lidded. The ninth chapter.

Plate XIII. *The Spuyten Duyvil Sleeper.* A yellow-glass house at the far northern turning, crowned with three pink periscope-eye towers, each opening onto a single watching circle. Inside, pink columns rise the full height of the room and a soft pink interior glows through the reflective walls. Pillowtwin describes them, in one of the dreams, as *the cousin who sleeps even more than I do*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XIV. *Watcher at Sherman Creek.* The pink-glass floating house crowned with three yellow trumpet-tubes of graduated size, the largest carrying a faintly drawn face — a pink dot for an eye, a small pink half-disc for a mouth. Watcher watches the Bronx shore continuously. The tenth chapter.

Plate XV. *The Harlem River Witness.* An open-sided pavilion with a yellow roof carried on slim pink columns, crowned by three yellow chimney-tower stacks, and on the deck two great pink J-shaped tube-columns standing like a pair of patient elephants. Mentioned by Watcher as *the only sibling I can see clearly when I turn south*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XVI. *Listener at the Bobby Wagner Walk*. The long pink bridge with two pink cylinders and two yellow discs rising from its body like four ears, with a yellow corridor passing beneath. Listener receives every letter. The eleventh chapter, and the longest in the book.

Plate XVII. *Greenroom at Carl Schurz Park*. The pink-yellow floating house with two yellow towers and two pink chimneys clustered at one end, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a daybed running the length of the room, with a single figure occasionally visible upon it, in repose. The twelfth chapter.

Plate XVIII. *The Yorkville Chorister.* A pink-glass houseboat crowned with five tall yellow funnels in a tight cluster, and inside, visible through the glass, a soft pink daybed and a pink portholed wall. Mentioned by Greenroom in a letter as *the sibling I wave to from the daybed.* Part of the chorus.

Plate XIX. *Diplomat near the United Nations.* The long pink steel-girder bridge curving past the East River esplanade in the Forties, crowned by three distinct yellow tower-forms set in procession — a small yellow J-loop, a central tower ornamented with pink ear-discs, and a great yellow elbow-cannon craning skyward in formal greeting. The thirteenth chapter.

Plate XX. *Glasshouse at the East 34th Esplanade.* The pink-glass floating pavilion with four great yellow column-towers rising the full height of the room and continuing up through the roof, set with pink donut-O windows in the rear wall. Glasshouse confesses. The fourteenth chapter.

Plate XXI. *The Murray Hill Witness.* A yellow-glass box-house crowned by four pink cylindrical chimney-towers and a pink elbow-tube curving up between them with a single porthole-eye gazing across the river. Mentioned in passing by Glasshouse as *the sibling who reads my confessions and never replies, but whose silence I trust*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XXII. *Mustache at Corlears Hook*. The long pink tubular bridge with a small pink U-loop arching out from the body like a curl of mustache, and a great yellow twin-funnel head rising at the far end with a single porthole-eye gazing back along the bridge. Mustache makes the others laugh, until the laugh becomes an elegy. The fifteenth chapter.

Plate XXIII. *The Lower East Side Echo.* A pink-and-yellow box-pavilion with a great swooping yellow gooseneck-tongue arching out of one wall and back into itself, crowned at the corners by small yellow sphere-balls. The swooping curve is the pavilion's whole posture. Mentioned by Mustache as *the sibling who never gets my jokes but always claps anyway*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XXIV. *The Two Bridges Witness.* A pink-and-yellow bridge-being on the East River with two alert pink-and-yellow tubes craning at the sky, each tipped with a small porthole-eye and a yellow cap. Mentioned briefly by Listener as *the sibling who writes the shortest letters in the bright archive, and whose shortness is itself a discipline.* Part of the chorus.

Plate XXV. *Lastlight at South Street Seaport, Pier 17*. The stately pink-and-yellow palace-house with four tall yellow towers and pink mushroom-baubles, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a small kitchen, a daybed, a porthole-window that looks out across the harbor toward the Battery. The sixteenth and final chapter, and the closing of the book.

❖

MAP & DIAGRAM

The Route of the Bright Archive

The walker's clockwise route around Manhattan, with the sixteen lettered pavilions marked in their stations and the nine chorus pavilions noted in passing. The total distance walked: approximately twenty-six miles. The total time of the walk: one season.

The route begins at [I] Sunfoot at the Battery, proceeds north up the Hudson River past Roselip, Periscope, Mirrorhouse, the Hudson Chorus, Sweetbrass, Four-Stack, the Hell's Kitchen Witness, Archway, Crowncap, and the Riverside Echo, around the turning at [XII] Pillowtwin where the Harlem River begins, past the Spuyten Duyvil Sleeper and south down the Harlem and East Rivers through Watcher, the Harlem River Witness, Listener, Greenroom, the Yorkville Chorister, Diplomat, Glasshouse, the Murray Hill Witness, Mustache, the Lower East Side Echo, the Two Bridges Witness, and ending at [XXV] Lastlight at Pier 17 / South Street Seaport, returning the walker to within sight of [I] Sunfoot across the harbor.

The walk may be done in a single long day for the strong walker, or over several days for the gentler walker, or over a season for the walker who wishes to read the letters as they go.

The walker is welcome at any of the sixteen lettered pavilions to pause, to read, to lounge, to sleep, to receive a blessing, to be confessed to, to be joked at, to be loved.

The bright archive remains open.

— END OF THE BRIGHT ARCHIVE —

— ❦ —

AN ATLAS OF WELCOME

Nineteen Pavilions

from Amsterdam to New Amsterdam

— ❦ —

by

SURJAN

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THE PAVILIONS OF BLOOM

A Builder's Notebook of the Crossing from Amsterdam to New Amsterdam

— ❦ —

FOREWORD

I want to tell you, before anything else, that this is a happy book.

I say so because the world is not always in the habit of letting books like this be happy. A book about leaving and arriving, about the body that is also a vessel, about the kind of person whose pronouns are still being invented in the room where they are spoken — such a book is often asked to carry a weight it did not consent to carry. To rehearse a difficulty. To prove a difficulty. To make of the difficulty a small, well-tended garden the reader may walk through and feel improved.

I have written something else. I have written a book in which nineteen pavilions, each of them a tulip and a ship and a body and a city, lift themselves out of Amsterdam's old soil and ride the long water and arrive in New Amsterdam, where they reblossom in the harbor as a public gift. I have written a book in which the difficulty has already been crossed, and what remains is the bright work of describing the crossing for those who have not yet made it. I have written a book in which the tulips are non-binary, the vessels are non-binary, the city is non-binary, and the author of all of them is non-binary, and none of these facts is the subject of the book. The subject of the book is joy. The subject of the book is welcome. The subject of the book is the moment when a bulb that was lifted from one ground decides, against all the conservative botany of the earth, to open in another.

A bulb is a small private decision. A bloom is the public record of that decision. Between the two stretches a sea.

I call this book a *notebook* because I am, by temperament, a builder. When I imagine a thing, I imagine it being constructed: scaffolding, cranes, a person in a beige coat walking the perimeter at dawn checking that the joints have held overnight. Each of the nineteen pavilions in this book is in some stage of being built. Some are still in their Amsterdam shipyards, swaddled in latticework, their tulip-fields growing on terraces that rise around them like an audience. Some are at sea, suspended between soils, painted on their hulls with the meadows they have left so that they may not forget how to recognize a meadow when they see one again. Some have arrived in New Amsterdam, where the citizens of the harbor city have climbed up onto their decks and are receiving them with the particular astonishment of a person who has just realized they were waiting for something they did not know they were waiting for.

Each pavilion has, inside it, a tulip-spirit. I have given them names. I have let them speak in the small voices a flower would have if a flower had been listening to all of human history with its single soft ear. They are my characters. They are also, in some sense, my friends. They are also, in some sense, me, and you, and the person who built the boat we are currently sitting on.

The book is structured as a long afternoon's conversation. I am the speaker. The City — New Amsterdam, who is genderqueer, who refuses to be only one thing, who is the harbor and the avenue and the unmarked grave and the sunlit window on the seventh floor — is the listener. She is my Khan. They are my Khan. He is my Khan, when the conversation requires him. The City takes all our pronouns and loses none of Her own.

I wrote the book in a register I borrowed, with great affection and no pretense of equaling it, from Italo Calvino. He showed me, when I was younger and more afraid, that a chapter could be the size of a poem and still hold a city. He showed me that description is its own kind of love. He showed me that you can build, in prose, a great patient cathedral of small rooms, and the reader can walk through the cathedral at their own pace, and what they take with them is not a plot but a way of seeing.

I want for you what he wanted for me. I want you to walk through these pavilions slowly. I want you to stop in any of them. I want you to pick the one that feels most like the place you are about to move to, and live there for as long as the sentence lasts, and then look up.

That is where the harbor is.

— *Surjan, in a sunlit kitchen, in the late afternoon*

~ ❦ ~

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1637, in a country that had only recently invented itself out of water, the price of a single tulip bulb of the variety *Semper Augustus* was reported to have reached the value of a canalside house in Amsterdam. The historians of capital have called this episode tulipomania, and they have used it, ever since, to teach undergraduates about the irrationality of markets. I would like, in this introduction, to suggest a different reading.

Consider what it would take, in any economy at all, for a flower to be worth a house.

It would take, first, a country in which houses had recently become precious because they had recently become possible. The Netherlands of the seventeenth century was a polity invented by drainage. The land beneath Amsterdam was, in the geological sense, still arriving. Every house was a small treaty between a family and the sea, witnessed by a windmill. To trade a house for a flower, then, was not an act of unreason. It was an act of equivalence. It was a person saying: *the thing I have built against the water, I will exchange for the thing that has lifted itself out of the ground. Both are improbable. Both are mine for only so long.*

It would take, second, a flower that was itself already a traveler. The tulip is not native to the lowlands. The bulbs that arrived in Amsterdam came by way of Constantinople, and before that by way of Persia, and before that by way of the high cold meadows of central Asia, where they had quietly perfected themselves for several million years before any human noticed. By the time a Dutch merchant held a *Semper Augustus* bulb in their hand and named a price equal to a house, the tulip had already crossed more borders than the merchant had names for. The flower was, to put it gently, more cosmopolitan than the buyer.

It would take, third, an idea — perhaps not yet articulated, perhaps only felt — that a thing could be lifted from one ground and made to open in another, and the opening would be, in some quiet way, an argument. An argument for the migrant. An argument for the bulb. An argument for the body that has consented to be moved.

This book is the long working-out of that argument.

The pavilions described in the pages that follow do not, of course, exist. They are sketches in a builder's notebook. But every pavilion that has ever existed was once a sketch in a builder's notebook, and many of them turned out to be wrong about themselves until they were built and then, in the light of being built, became right. I would like to claim the same indulgence for these.

The pavilions travel, in this book, from Amsterdam to a place I have insisted on calling New Amsterdam, knowing perfectly well that the city now answers to a different name. I have used the

older name partly because the book is a fable and fables prefer their geographies a little out of date, and partly because I want, for the duration of these pages, to remember that the island under the avenues was not always what it now is. Before it was Manhattan it was Mannahatta — *the island of many hills* — and it was tended, for many human lifetimes, by the Lenape, who did not consider the soil to be private. The harbor that receives my pavilions is the same harbor that received, four centuries ago, a small Dutch ship and the long misunderstanding that followed. I would like the reception, this time, to go differently. I would like the bloom that opens in the harbor to be a small, public correction. I would like the tulips to say, in their soft voices: *we know what soil this is. We come bearing pollen, not deeds. We are guests.*

A welcome, to mean anything, must be offered by someone who has the right to offer it. The Lenape have that right. The pavilions in this book understand this. So does the City who listens to them and who is, in the chapters that follow, my Khan.

The remainder of the book proceeds in three movements. The first, **Lifting**, describes the six pavilions in their Amsterdam shipyards, still attached to scaffolding, still attended by cranes, still receiving the visits of the bulb-people who will travel in them. The second, **The Crossing**, describes the six pavilions at sea, suspended between soils, in the long quiet hours when a vessel has nothing to do but be a vessel. The third, **Reblossoming**, describes the seven pavilions in New Amsterdam, opening in the harbor, becoming public, being received.

Between the movements, and at the beginning and end, there are small dialogues. In them I am speaking to the City. The City is speaking to me. Sometimes the City is speaking and I am only listening. Please feel free, when you reach those pages, to listen with me.

I wish you happy reading. I wish you, more than that, a happy lifting.

The harbor is a few pages south.

~ ❦ ~

PRELUDE

In which Surjan greets the City and the City returns the greeting

The City said: *Tell me about the pavilions you have seen.*

I said: *I have seen nineteen.*

She said: *Begin with any of them. Begin with the one that is easiest. Begin with the one you understand the least. The order does not matter to me. I am the kind of listener who hears all the chapters at once, the way a harbor hears all the boats at once, and only afterward does the harbor decide which boat it loved best.*

I said: *I will begin with the lifting. I will begin with the pavilions that are still being built. They are the ones I love best, because they have not yet had to become true.*

The City said: *Then begin in Amsterdam. Begin where the water is older than the houses.*

I said: *Are you ready?*

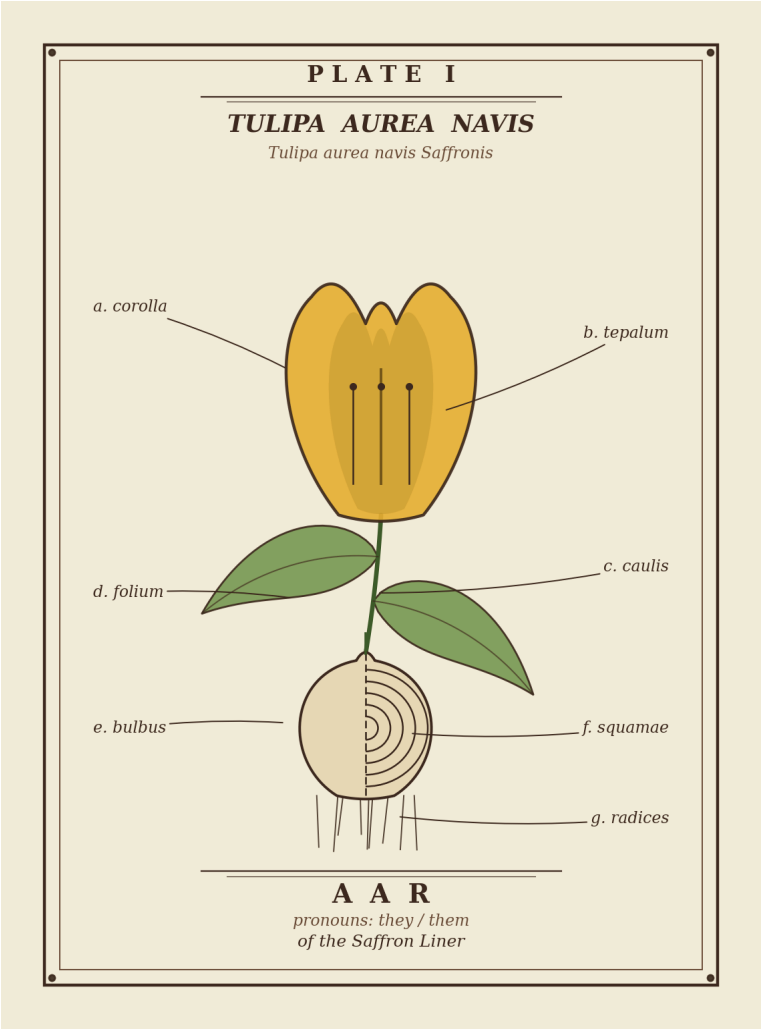
The City laughed. Her laughter was the sound of an avenue in late spring, when the windows have just begun to be opened again and someone, somewhere on the seventh floor, is practicing scales on a piano. *I have been ready,* She said, *since 1626*.

~ ❦ ~

PART I — LIFTING

The pavilions in Amsterdam, still under construction, still being attended by their cranes

Plate I
THE SAFFRON LINER



In the oldest of the Amsterdam shipyards, where the canals have forgotten which of them is the original and which is the improvised reply, there is a vessel called the Saffron Liner. She is the eldest of the pavilions and she is yellow because yellow is the first color a bulb learns to make. Around her hull, on tiered platforms that rise like the seats of a small civic theatre, the tulip-fields grow in pink terraces, so that anyone climbing to her highest deck must do so through audiences of softly attending flowers. The cranes that built her have become attached to her. They lean in toward her body the way long aunts lean in toward a niece who is about to leave for school. They have not yet been told that she is finished. They will not be told for some time. To tell them would be to invite them to leave, and the Saffron Liner has a tender feeling for her cranes.

Inside her, in a cabin paneled with lemonwood, lives the tulip-spirit named **Aar**, who is the eldest of the bulb-children and who took, as a name, the Dutch word for *vein* — because, Aar said, *I am the conduit through which the family travels.* Aar's pronouns are *they* and *them*, though Aar will accept *we* in the plural when speaking on behalf of the bulbs in the cargo hold, who are, after all, also Aar in some lateral fashion. Aar has been watching the construction of the Saffron Liner for six years. They have an opinion about every plank. They have, in their cabin, a notebook in which they have drawn the ship at every stage of becoming, including the stages it never quite passed through, and looking at this notebook is like looking at a person grow up in time-lapse. Aar is fond of the notebook. Aar is not fond, particularly, of the fact that the notebook has been seen.

The Saffron Liner does not yet know what she is for. This is the proper condition of a vessel that is still being built. It is also, Aar has noticed, the proper condition of a person. *The day a ship knows what she is for,* Aar says, *is the day she has already become a museum of herself.* The Saffron Liner intends to delay that day as long as possible. Her plan, insofar as a vessel may have a plan, is to leave Amsterdam still slightly unfinished. She will carry her scaffolding with her across the water. She will arrive in New Amsterdam still in the act of becoming, and she will allow the citizens of the new harbor to climb up onto her highest deck and watch her finish becoming, in public, in front of them, with their permission.

This, Aar believes, is the most generous thing a vessel can do. *To arrive complete,* Aar says, *is to deny the people of the new harbor the joy of welcome. A vessel that arrives complete is asking only for admiration. A vessel that arrives unfinished is asking for help. And help is the older form of love.*

The Saffron Liner will lift, in the spring. The cranes will be told a few weeks before. They will be sad. They will also be relieved — for cranes, like aunts, prefer to be released from the duty of perpetual attendance into the freedom of intermittent visits. Aar will take, in their cabin, the lemonwood notebook, and a small jar of Amsterdam soil, and a single seed of a kind of tulip that has not yet been named, on the grounds that it would be presumptuous to name a flower before it has had its first opinion of where it is going.

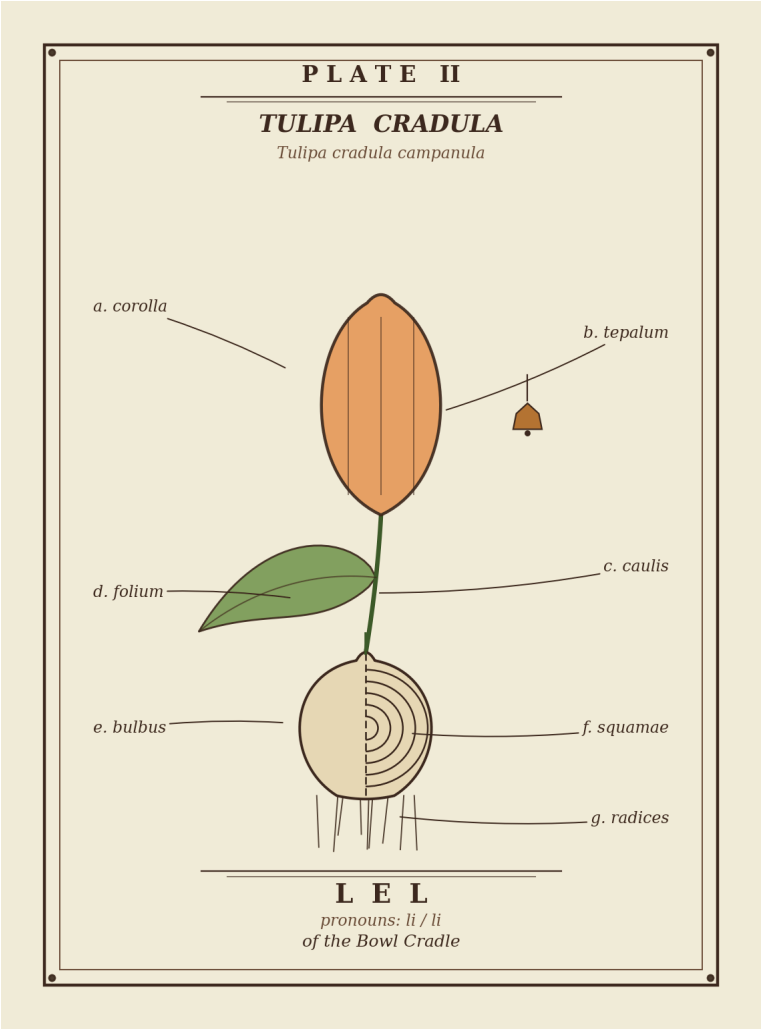
The seed will be planted in New Amsterdam. The flower that grows from it will be named, by the citizens of that harbor, on the day it opens. Aar has insisted on this. *It is not for the gardener,* Aar has said, *to name what the new soil makes possible.*

This is the lesson of the Saffron Liner. She is yellow because yellow is the first color a bulb learns to make. She is unfinished because unfinished is the first condition a body learns to love. She is leaving Amsterdam because Amsterdam, which she loves, has finished teaching her the lessons it had to teach. Her cranes will weep on the morning of her lifting. Her cranes will be right to weep.

The proper response to a beautiful departure is grief, and the proper response to grief is to stay long enough to wave.

~ ❦ ~

Plate II
THE BOWL CRADLE



There is a pavilion in the inner shipyard which has the shape of a great wooden cup. Its hull is unpainted, the color of new bread, and it sits within a forest of crisscrossed scaffolding so dense that, from certain angles, the cup appears to be a kind of fruit suspended inside a wooden ribcage. The flowers that grow at its base are yellow and pink in alternating swells, and they reach almost up to the curve of the hull, so that the pavilion seems to be drinking from the field, or perhaps the field is drinking from the pavilion — the directionality of nourishment, in this shipyard, is not always settled.

The vessel is called the Bowl Cradle. She is the second-eldest of the pavilions, but she is, in temperament, the youngest. She was designed by a builder named Nellij, who insisted that what a migrating bulb needs most is the architecture of a cradle: a curve to be held by, walls that lean inward

without insisting, a rim from which to look up at sky. Nellij also insisted that the cradle should never be filled — that a cradle filled is no longer a cradle, only a basket. The Bowl Cradle, accordingly, was built to remain partly empty. There is a hollow at her center, a soft echoing well of unpainted wood, where the wind makes the sound of a person humming to a child.

The tulip-spirit who lives inside the Bowl Cradle is **Lel**, who is the smallest of the bulbs and who, by virtue of being smallest, is also the most certain of themself. Lel is non-binary in the gentle, casual way that very young flowers are non-binary, which is to say without effort, without theory, and without any sense that the matter is in dispute. Lel uses the pronoun *li* — a sound Lel made up, on a Tuesday, while playing in the empty hollow of the Bowl Cradle. Li is fond of li own pronoun. Li teaches it to anyone who asks. Li does not insist that anyone use it; Lel believes that pronouns are gifts, and a gift cannot be insisted upon without ceasing to be a gift.

Lel has, in li small quarters at the very bottom of the bowl, a single object: a copper bell the size of a thimble, hung from a thread, which rings when the wind enters the hollow. The bell does not ring often. When it rings, Lel makes a note in a small ledger li keeps. The ledger contains two columns: *the bell rang* and *what I was thinking when the bell rang*. Lel believes — this is li only theological belief, at this age — that the bell is a kind of weather report, but for the inside of a person rather than the outside. *When the bell rings,* li says, *something has shifted in me, and I would like to know what it was.*

The Bowl Cradle will not be the first to lift. She will, by Nellij's design, be the last. Nellij has explained that the cradle is the form in which a journey begins, and so it must be the form in which the journey lifts last — *because the journey is reversed when the cradle leaves; the journey begins where the cradle ends.* Nobody, including Nellij, fully understands this sentence, but it is repeated frequently in the shipyard, and most of those who repeat it find that they understand it in different ways depending on the day.

Lel is unworried by the long wait. Li has the bell. Li has the ledger. Li has the hollow, and the field of yellow and pink at the base of the bowl, and the wood that smells, when warmed by sun, like the inside of a bakery in the hour before opening. Li has the cranes. Li has the builder, Nellij, who is themself non-binary and who comes, every evening at the close of the working day, to sit on the rim of the bowl and tell Lel a single sentence about the day. The sentences are usually small. *We replaced the third support beam. A heron landed on the eastern crane and would not leave for an hour. I dreamed last night that the bowl was a hat.*

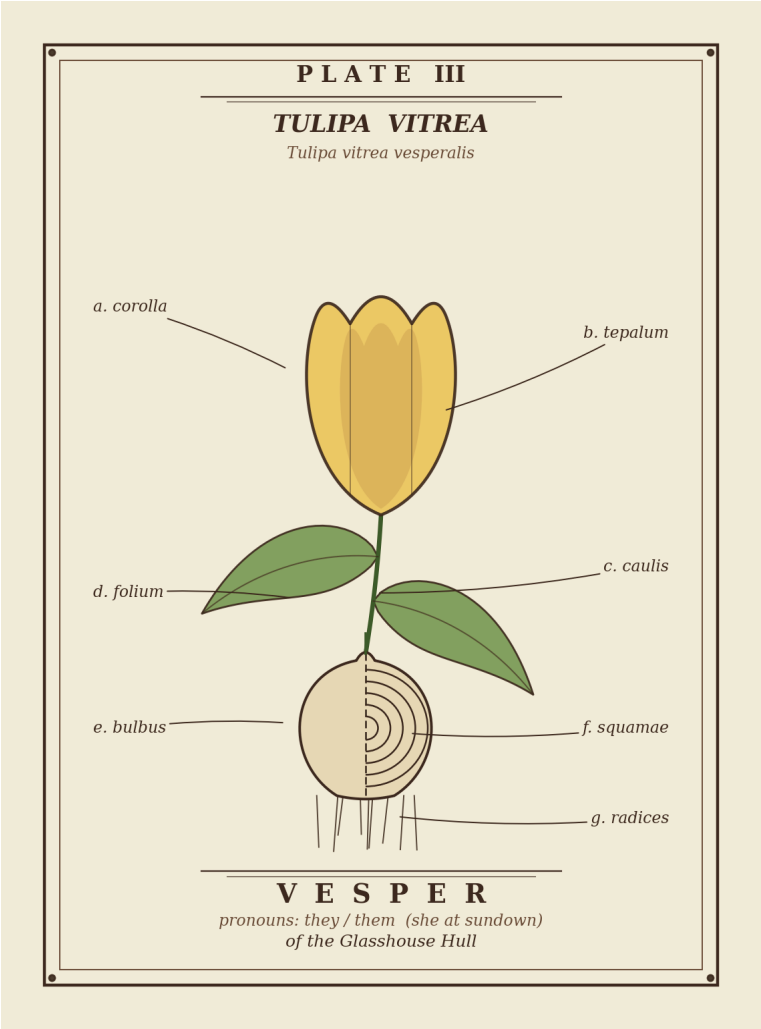
Lel writes the sentences down in a separate book.

When the Bowl Cradle lifts at last, she will carry, beneath her hull, the soil in which Lel was first planted. Nellij has insisted on this. *A cradle without first soil,* Nellij has said, *is a cradle that has learned how to forget. We will not teach this cradle how to forget.*

In the new harbor, when the Bowl Cradle arrives, she will be lowered with great ceremony onto a temporary plinth, and Lel will be permitted to plant the first soil in a place of li own choosing, anywhere along the New Amsterdam shoreline. Li has not yet decided where. Li thinks li will know when li sees it. Li is, after all, very small, and small things are unusually good at recognizing the place that has been waiting for them.

~ ❦ ~

Plate III
THE GLASSHOUSE HULL



Some of the pavilions are built outdoors, in the customary way, with the sky as their ceiling and the weather as their tutor. The Glasshouse Hull is not one of these. She has been built inside a great vaulted greenhouse of glass and yellow steel, on the outskirts of Amsterdam, where the air is held at a temperature slightly warmer than the city outside, and where the rain — when it falls — falls only on the glass and not on the vessel.

The decision to build her this way was controversial. Some in the shipyard thought it was an indulgence; that a vessel raised under glass would, on her first morning at sea, be confused by the proximity of weather. Others argued the opposite — that a vessel raised under glass would have, in the depths of her timbers, a memory of having once been protected, and that this memory would steady her in storms. The argument was settled, as most arguments in the shipyard are settled, by a

vote of the cranes, who were unanimous. *We are mechanical,* the cranes said, *and we know that a thing assembled in shelter is a thing assembled with care. The vessel will be glad, later, that her edges were trued in still air.*

The Glasshouse Hull is yellow, in the manner of the pavilions, but a different kind of yellow — the yellow of a candle seen through a paper screen, rather than the yellow of a fruit at noon. Pink tulips grow along her uppermost rim, and a long pink ribbon of them runs along her midship platform, and at the base of her hull, where the visitors gather to look up, there are tulips so vivid that they appear to have been painted from inside. The whole vessel, viewed through the warmed glass of the greenhouse, has the quality of a botanical illustration that has decided to enlarge itself.

Her resident tulip-spirit is named **Vesper**, who took for a name the old word for *evening* and who, accordingly, is most awake in the hour just before sundown. Vesper uses the pronouns *they* and *them*, but at sundown precisely — for one hour each day — Vesper requests that they be addressed as *she*, in honor of an aunt who taught Vesper how to read. The aunt is no longer living. The hour-of-she is, in Vesper's accounting, a small daily candle for the aunt's memory. Visitors who arrive in the greenhouse during this hour and call Vesper *they* are gently corrected. Visitors who arrive five minutes earlier or five minutes later are not corrected. The hour is precise and the hour is enough.

Vesper is the most studious of the tulip-spirits. Vesper has read, by some accounting that is not entirely possible to verify, a substantial portion of the literature of the Low Countries; certainly Vondel, certainly Spinoza, certainly the small private letters of Maria van Reygersbergh. Vesper has opinions about all of them, but Vesper has resolved, for the duration of the crossing, not to share their opinions with anyone but the aunt, in the hour-of-she, in the cabin, with the candle lit. *The crossing,* Vesper says, *is not the time for opinions about Spinoza. The crossing is the time for being kind to one's fellow bulbs and learning the names of the new birds.*

The Glasshouse Hull will lift, in time, by a method that has been the subject of considerable engineering. Her glass house cannot, of course, accompany her to sea. The plan, as agreed upon by the cranes and by Nellij and by the harbor pilots, is that the greenhouse will be opened at the roof and the Glasshouse Hull will rise out of it on a system of pulleys, into the open Amsterdam morning, and from there she will be carried on rollers to the dock, and from there she will be lifted by water. The opening of the greenhouse roof has been promised, by all who will witness it, to be one of the most beautiful sights in the history of the city: a great hinged glass ceiling parting in the middle to release a yellow ship covered in pink tulips into the actual sky.

Vesper is excited about this. Vesper is also, privately, terrified. Vesper has spent their entire life inside the greenhouse, and the prospect of the actual sky is, Vesper admits, slightly more sky than

Vesper has ever known a sky to be. The aunt, in the hour-of-she, has reassured Vesper. *Sky is sky,* the aunt has said. *The greenhouse only ever borrowed it. The sky was always already yours.*

This, Vesper has decided, is the most useful thing the aunt ever taught them.

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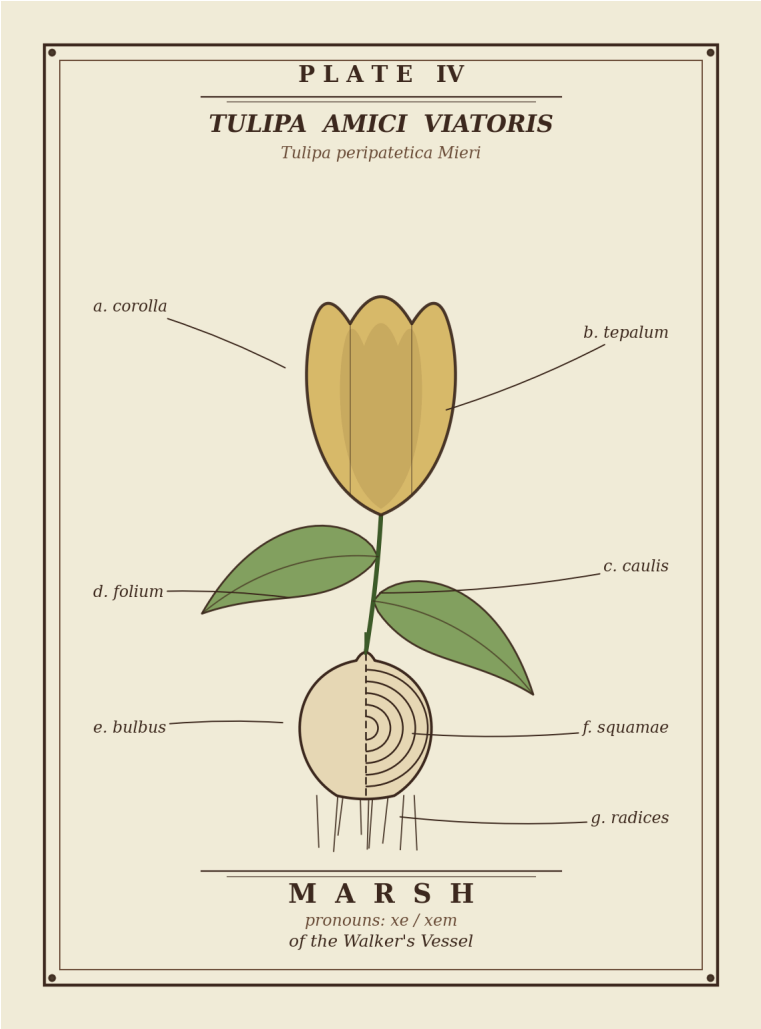
Plate IV
THE WALKER'S VESSEL



There is a photograph, taken at dawn on a Tuesday in early spring, of a single figure walking across a wooden plank between two great fields of tulips, toward a yellow ship in scaffolding. The figure wears a long beige coat. The coat is unbelted, and the lower edges of it brush against the heads of the pink and yellow tulips on either side, leaving small streaks of pollen along the wool. The figure's hands are in the coat's pockets. The figure's face is not visible. The figure is walking neither quickly nor slowly. The figure has the bearing of a person who has been walking, in some form, all their life, and who is now walking simply because the walking has not yet finished.

This figure is a builder. Their name is **Mier**, which is an old word for *ant* in the dialect of one of the small inland towns. Mier chose the name themself, for two reasons: because ants are the most patient builders any flower has ever been built by, and because ants are not, as a rule, gendered in

any way the human sciences have managed to define. Mier uses the pronoun *they* in the company of others and *I* in the company of themself, which Mier considers a sufficient grammatical inheritance for one lifetime.

The vessel toward which Mier walks, in the photograph, has come to be called — by Mier, by the cranes, by the bulb-spirits — the Walker's Vessel. It is a yellow ship of moderate size, set within a high lattice of scaffolding, surrounded on all sides by tulip-fields whose pink and yellow heads come up almost to the height of Mier's coat. From a distance, the photograph appears to show a person walking through a sea, except that the sea is made of flowers. It is, in this respect, the most accurate image of what the entire project of these pavilions has been about: a person walking through a flower-sea toward a vessel they have helped to build, in order to climb inside the vessel and travel the actual sea, and arrive in a new harbor and discover that the new harbor is also, in some sense, made of flowers, and that the walking has not been interrupted but only rerouted.

The tulip-spirit who lives inside the Walker's Vessel is named **Marsh**. Marsh has the pronoun *xe* and *xem*, and xe came by these pronouns by reading them in a small American magazine that arrived in Amsterdam by accident in 1992 and was treasured ever since by the librarian of the shipyard, who lent it to Marsh on the condition that it be returned in good condition, which Marsh has, faithfully, every Friday, for many years now. Marsh is a deeply private flower. Marsh does not speak often. When Marsh does speak, xe speaks slowly, and xe pauses between sentences for long enough that the listener has time to consider whether they have been included in the conversation or whether the conversation has temporarily gone elsewhere.

Marsh and Mier have known each other for a long time. They are, in some sense, a pair. They are not a couple in the romantic sense; their bond is older than romance and softer than friendship; it is the bond between a builder and the spirit of the thing the builder has built. Mier walks across the plank, every morning, to visit Marsh. They do not, often, exchange words. Mier sits on a small bench inside the Walker's Vessel. Marsh remains in xyr cabin. The light comes in through the round portholes and lies across the floor in pale ovals.

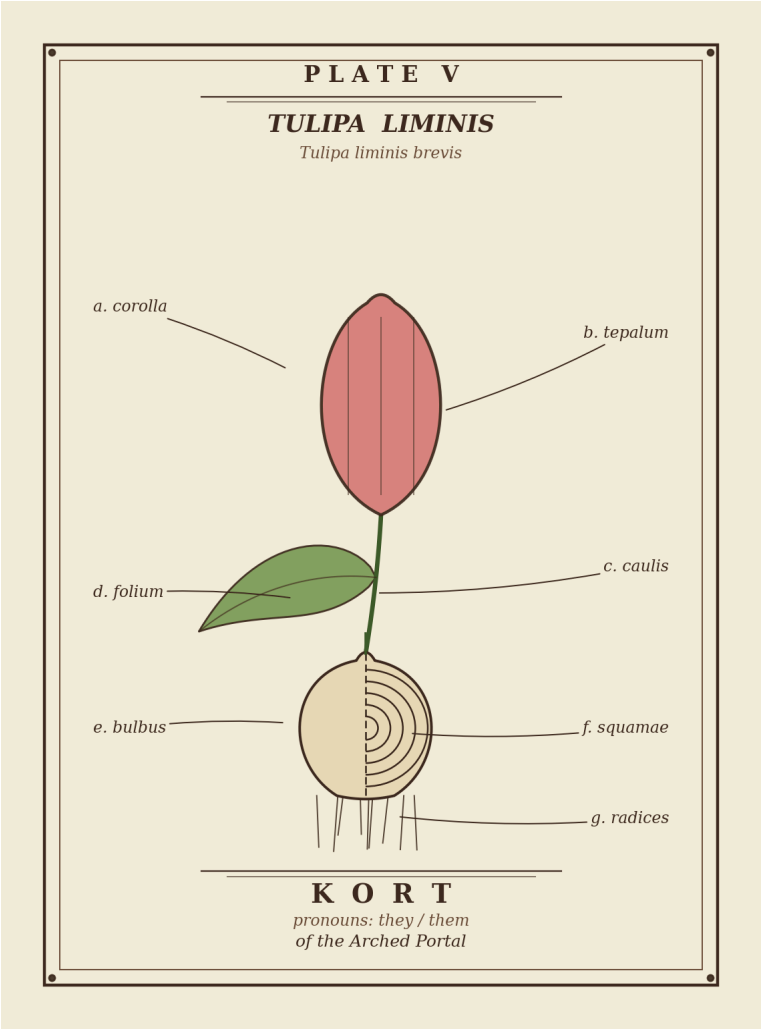
When Mier walks away again, in the evening, the same plank carries them in the reverse direction, and the same fields of pink and yellow tulips incline toward the coat. The pollen accumulates on the wool. By the time the Walker's Vessel is ready to lift, Mier's coat will be saturated with pollen — yellow on the right side, where the yellow field has touched it longer, pink on the left, where the pink field has done the touching. Mier will not have the coat cleaned. Mier will wear the coat onto the vessel on the morning of the lifting, and across the sea, and into New Amsterdam, where the pollen will be admired by passersby who will assume it is a kind of paint, and Mier will not correct them.

This is what Mier has to say about the matter, on the rare occasions when xe — when *they* — say anything at all about it: *The coat is the only document I have kept of the whole project. I would not destroy a document.*

Marsh, in the cabin, behind the round porthole, agrees silently. The sun crosses the floor. The Walker's Vessel waits to be ready.

~ ❦ ~

Plate V
THE ARCHED PORTAL



In the western part of the shipyard, set apart from the others by a long avenue of beech trees, there is a pavilion that does not look, at first glance, like a vessel. It looks like a cathedral. It is a great arched glass-and-steel hall, vaulted and pale, with high latticed windows that taper toward the apex, and at its far end — visible only when one walks the full length of the central aisle — sits a small yellow ship, dignified and unornamented, framed by the arch like a saint's portrait framed by an altar.

This is the Arched Portal. It is technically a vessel, in that the small yellow ship at its center is buildable and seaworthy, but the larger structure — the cathedral that frames it — is what gives the pavilion its name. The Portal is a kind of architectural threshold. A bulb who has decided to leave Amsterdam, but who is not yet ready to commit fully to the leaving, may come to the Portal and walk down the central aisle, between the long beds of pink tulips that line the floor, and stand in

front of the small yellow ship, and turn around. If the bulb turns around and walks back out, the Portal has done its work. If the bulb walks forward and climbs onto the ship, the Portal has also done its work. The Portal has no preference.

The tulip-spirit who lives inside the small yellow ship at the heart of the Portal is named **Kort**, which means *short*, on the grounds that Kort has resolved to keep all of their own sentences short. Kort uses *they* and *them*, as a kind of grammatical brevity. Kort does not believe in long pronouns. Kort does not believe, particularly, in long anything. Kort's longest expressed opinion, on record, is the following: *A welcome should be brief. A welcome should be true. A welcome should not exceed the patience of the person being welcomed.* This is, by Kort's standards, a paragraph.

Kort's role in the shipyard is unusual. Kort does not, like the other tulip-spirits, intend to travel across the water in the vessel they live in. The Arched Portal is, in fact, the only one of the nineteen pavilions that will not be lifted. It will remain in Amsterdam. It will become — Nellij has decreed this — the formal *threshold of departure* for all of the other pavilions. On the morning of each lifting, the bulb-passengers and the builders will assemble in the Portal, and they will walk down the central aisle, and they will pause at the small yellow ship, and they will turn either around or forward, as they choose. The ones who turn around will not be shamed. The ones who walk forward will not be celebrated. The Portal will receive both decisions with the same cool light through the high windows.

Kort will, in this way, see every leaving but make none of them themself. Kort has accepted this. Kort believes that some flowers are made to travel and some are made to be the doorway through which travel happens, and that there is no hierarchy between these two kinds of flower — there is only different work. Kort is content with their work. Kort spends most of their time, between liftings, watering the pink tulips in the floor-beds and replacing the small candles that burn at the foot of the small yellow ship, and listening to the sound the wind makes when it enters the high windows of the cathedral and curls down through the latticework toward the floor.

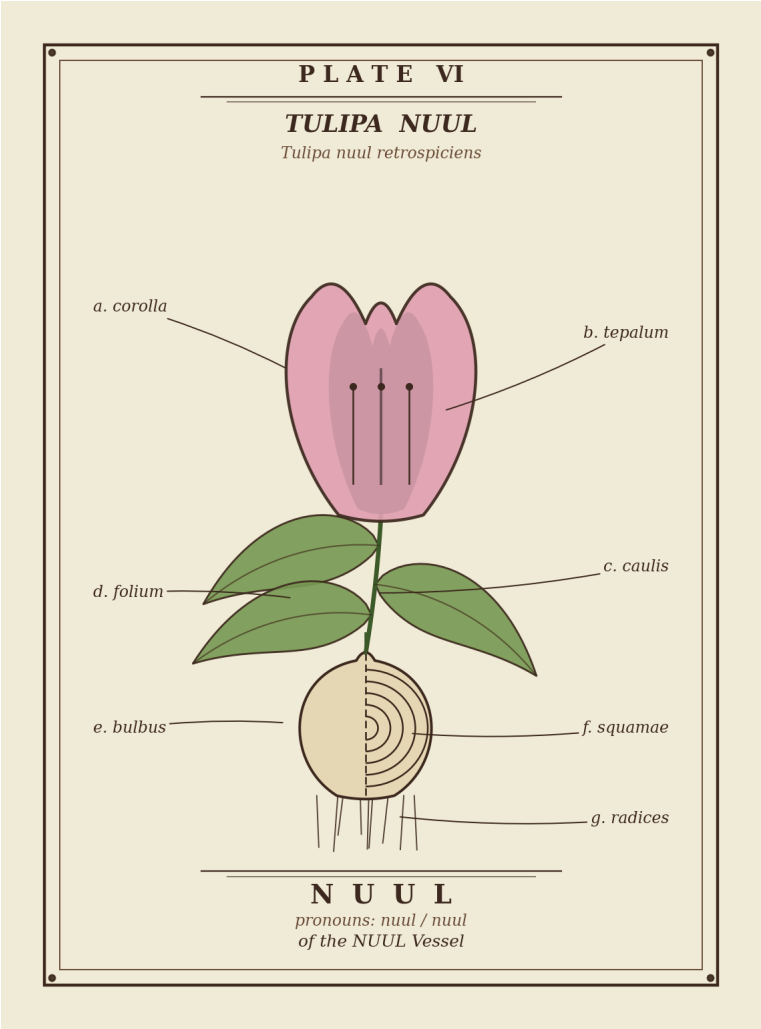
It is a sound, Kort says, like a person clearing their throat to say something kind.

The Arched Portal is the steadiest of the pavilions. It is also, by some accounting, the most generous, because it has refused the journey that would have made it the protagonist of its own story. Kort understands this and does not mind. *I am not the protagonist,* Kort says — and one notices that this is, by Kort's economic standards, almost a soliloquy — *I am the first sentence. The protagonists begin where I end.*

The wind enters the high windows. It curls down through the lattice. Kort waters the tulips. The next lifting is in three weeks.

~ ❦ ~

Plate VI
THE NUUL VESSEL



There is a pavilion in the largest of the shipyards, near the river-mouth, which is so vast that it cannot be photographed in its entirety from any single point. It is a pale pink hull, broader than long, set inside a tower of crisscrossed catwalks and yellow-domed observation pods. On its uppermost deck, as on the others, the tulips grow — but here they grow in such density that the entire crown of the ship appears to be one continuous pink-and-yellow lawn, undulating in the wind like the back of an animal that has finally agreed to be petted. The hull is inscribed, near the bow, with a single word in dark uneven lettering: NUUL.

The word is the vessel's name. It is also the name of the tulip-spirit who lives inside her, and whose name was given to her when she was first sketched on a napkin, in a café in the Jordaan district, by a builder who had been awake for thirty-seven hours and was no longer entirely sure

which language they were thinking in. The word *nuul* does not mean anything in Dutch, or in any other language the builders have been able to identify. It is a sound. It is, perhaps, the sound a bulb would make if a bulb could exhale.

Nuul uses the pronoun *nuul*, both in the singular and the plural, in the subject and the object position. *Nuul is here. Speak to nuul. Nuul has thought about it.* This is grammatically unusual. It is also, Nuul insists, grammatically correct, on the grounds that the only person with full authority over Nuul's pronouns is Nuul. The shipyard has agreed. The Dutch language has, as is its custom, made room.

Nuul is the largest of the tulip-spirits, and also — perhaps consequently — the calmest. Nuul does not move quickly. Nuul does not arrive at conclusions quickly. When asked a question, Nuul considers it for a length of time that other tulip-spirits find difficult to bear. *What color is the sky today, Nuul?* a small bulb-child asked, once, on a clear autumn morning. Nuul considered the question for forty minutes. *Pale,* nuul said, eventually. *But thoroughly pale.*

The Nuul Vessel is the largest of the lifting pavilions. She will carry, when she sails, more than a hundred and fifty thousand bulbs, in cargo holds that have been specially designed by Nellij to maintain the correct humidity and the correct memory of darkness. (Bulbs, Nellij has explained, do not require darkness so much as they require the *recollection* of darkness; a hold that is too brightly lit will produce, on arrival, a bulb that has forgotten its own season.) The Nuul Vessel will sail from Amsterdam in the late spring. She will take, by current estimates, eleven days to cross the Atlantic. She will arrive in New Amsterdam on a date Nuul has not yet been told.

This last fact is, Nellij believes, important. Nuul prefers not to know the exact date of arrival. Nuul has explained, to anyone who has asked, that arrival is a kind of fruit and that fruit ripens better when it is not being watched. *Tell nuul the date the day before,* Nuul has said. *Or the morning of. Or — best — when nuul has already arrived, and is standing on the deck, and looking at the new harbor, and someone says: nuul, you have arrived. That is the sweetest way to learn it.*

The shipyard has agreed to this also.

There is, in the cabin of the Nuul Vessel, a single window that faces aft — the only one of its kind in any of the pavilions. The other vessels look forward, toward the new soil. The Nuul Vessel will look backward, toward the soil it has left. Nuul has insisted on this. *The new harbor will arrive at nuul whether nuul looks at it or not,* Nuul says. *But Amsterdam will only stay visible if nuul does the looking.*

This, Nellij has admitted, is the most theologically interesting opinion any of the tulip-spirits have yet expressed. Nellij has not been able to argue against it. Nellij has agreed to install the

aft-facing window. The window has been installed. Nuul has tested it. Nuul has reported that it is satisfactory.

The lifting is in seven days.

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INTERLUDE I

In which Surjan and the City pause between Lifting and Crossing

The City said: *Six pavilions, and not one of them has yet left the harbor.*

I said: *That is the way of liftings. The lifting is mostly the not-yet-leaving. The leaving itself is brief.*

She said: *I have always understood it the other way. The leaving is the long part. The arrival is brief.*

I said: *Perhaps we are agreeing.*

She said: *Perhaps we are. Tell me, Surjan — when you describe these vessels still inside their scaffolding, do you mean me to think of myself? Was I once like this? When I was being built — when the first wooden palisade went up at the foot of the island, and the Dutch surveyor looked out at what they imagined was an unowned hill — was I, also, a vessel attended by cranes, and a tulip-spirit in a cabin, and a builder in a long beige coat?*

I said: *I think you were. I think every place is, before it agrees to be a place. The agreement comes later.*

She said: *And the Lenape who tended me before the surveyor arrived — were they my cranes?*

I said: *No. They were your soil. And the soil, when it is honored, becomes a kind of permission.*

The City was quiet for a moment.

Then She said: *Tell me about the crossing. Tell me what happens when a vessel has finally agreed to leave its harbor.*

I said: *It becomes, for a while, no longer a vessel. It becomes only the sea around it.*

She said: *That sounds frightening.*

I said: *It is. But it is also the part where the vessel learns what it is for. A vessel cannot learn that, fully, until it is alone with the water. The shipyard teaches the vessel many things. The water teaches it the rest.*

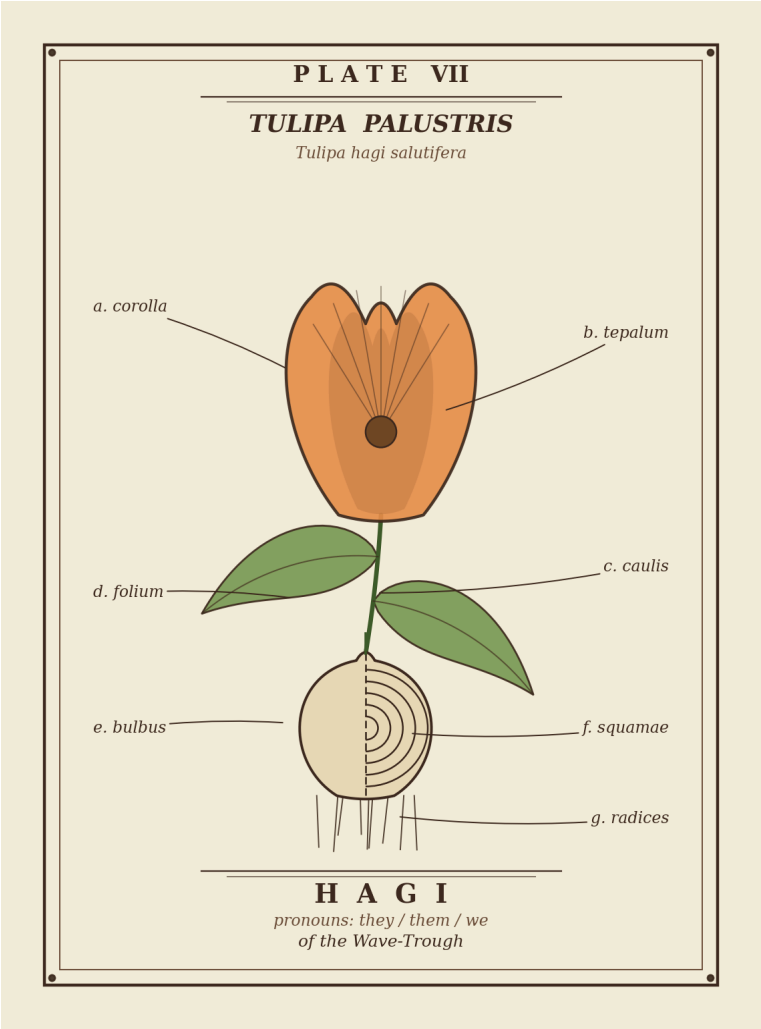
She said: *Then proceed.*

~ ❦ ~

PART II — THE CROSSING

The pavilions at sea, between soils, in the long quiet hours of suspension

Plate VII
THE WAVE-TROUGH



There is a vessel which is not, properly, a single ship but a kind of bridge that travels. From above, it appears as a long undulating channel of golden wood, a great trough whose upper surface is given over entirely to the cultivation of tulips — yellow on the inland side, pink on the seaward side, with a narrow river of orange running between them — and whose underside is hollowed out into a long open hall, through which boats may pass. The boats that pass beneath the Wave-Trough are small, with two or three travelers in each. They are the dinghies, the canoes, the rowboats, the modest craft of those who could not afford a passage on the larger pavilions and who, by a system of public welcome that the Wave-Trough has institutionalized, are carried beneath its hull as a free service of the crossing.

The Wave-Trough is, in this sense, the most political of the pavilions. It is also the most architecturally peculiar. It does not sail across the water in the conventional manner. It is towed, slowly, by a fleet of smaller boats in a wide harness, like an enormous cradle being carried in a procession. The trough remains stable, by design, regardless of weather; the tulips on its upper deck do not lose their bloom even in heavy seas. Below, in the open hall through which the small boats are funneled, the air is cool and amber-colored, and the sound of the water against the ribs of the trough is a kind of low constant hymn.

The tulip-spirit who lives at the highest point of the Wave-Trough — the slight crest where yellow meets pink, where one watershed of bloom changes its mind and becomes the other — is named **Hagi**, after a small wading bird that the builders had often seen at the edges of the Amsterdam canals. Hagi uses the pronoun *they*, but Hagi also uses *we* with great frequency, on the grounds that Hagi has come to understand themself as a small committee. *I am several flowers,* Hagi explains, *who have agreed to occupy one stem. We get along. We do not always agree. We do not pretend to.*

Hagi's task during the crossing is to call down, through a small speaking-tube installed in the trough, to the travelers in the boats below — to greet each one as they pass beneath, to ask after their journey, to offer a small phrase of encouragement. Hagi does this all day and most of the night. Hagi has, after some months of practice, developed an extraordinary repertoire of greetings. They are never repeated. They are never elaborate. *Welcome, friend, you are well-shaped for the morning. Cousin, the wind is at your shoulder; bear up. Beloved, the trough above you is yellow on its inland side, and you are passing now beneath the place where pink begins. Make a wish if you have one.*

The travelers below have come to expect these greetings. They have been heard to weep at them. One traveler, an old fisher from Friesland, was reported to have said that the Wave-Trough's greeting — one specific greeting, given to him on the third afternoon of his crossing — was the kindest sentence anyone had said to him in his entire life. The sentence in question was: *Friend, your hands are very tired. The harbor is much closer than it looks.*

Hagi does not remember saying it. Hagi has said too many sentences to remember any one of them. This, Hagi believes, is the proper condition of a crossing: that the kindness be unrecorded, that the kindness leave no archive, that the kindness arrive in the recipient and stay there, without sender, without copy, without ledger. *We are non-binary,* Hagi has said, *not only in our gender but in our memory. We refuse the binary of remembered and forgotten. Our kindness is in a third condition.*

The crossing of the Wave-Trough, by virtue of its slowness, takes nearly twice as long as the others. It will arrive, in New Amsterdam, two weeks after the Saffron Liner. By the time it arrives, the citizens of the new harbor will have learned to expect it; word will have spread, ahead of it, of

the trough that carries small boats beneath its belly and greets each one in passing. The harbor, when it sees the Wave-Trough at last, will line the docks with people calling up.

Hagi will not, at that point, be tired. Hagi will be — Hagi has insisted on the precise word — *replenished.*

A flower replenished by speech. This is, perhaps, the strangest of the propositions in this notebook. But the Wave-Trough was built to test it.

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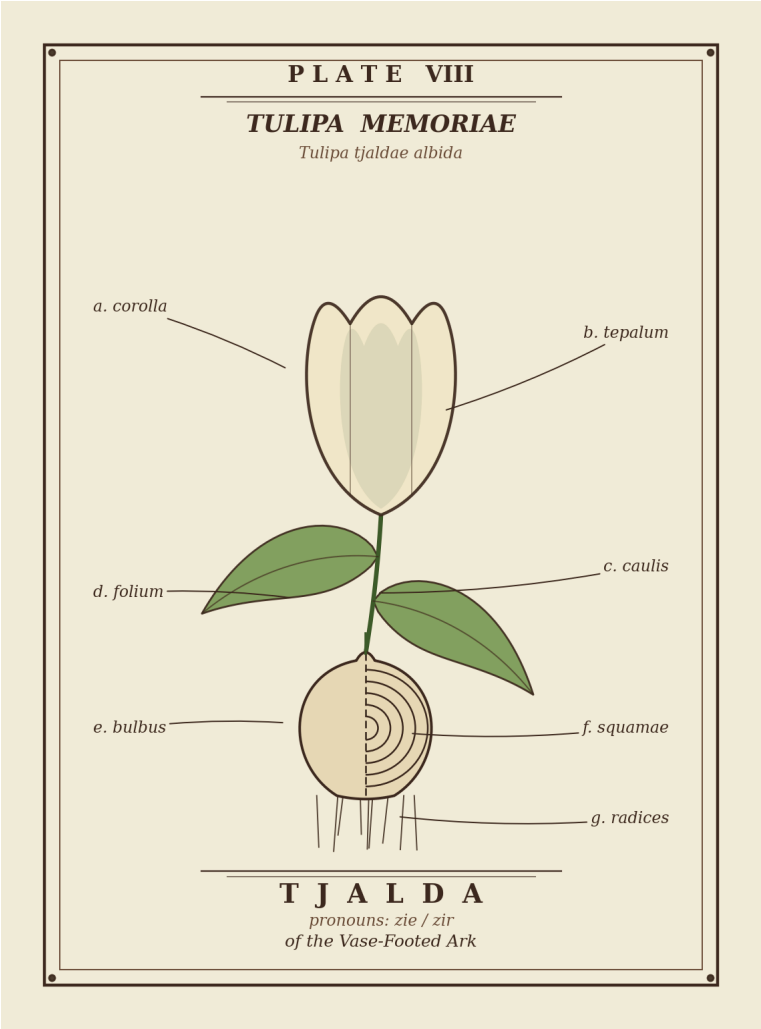
Plate VIII
THE VASE-FOOTED ARK



Some vessels, in the long history of vessels, have stood on legs. Most of these have done so for repair, in the dry-dock, briefly. There is one pavilion in this book, however, that has been designed to stand on legs permanently. It is the Vase-Footed Ark.

The Ark is striped: a band of pink along the upper hull, a broader band of buttercup-yellow along the lower, and a narrow ribbon of coral along the gunwale where the two meet. From a distance, she has the bearing of an old festival cake set out for the public on a long civic table. The legs on which she stands are not, strictly, legs. They are vases — eight of them, of varying heights and of various colors (sage, oat, buttermilk, ash-blue, terracotta, pale rose, bone, and an indeterminate green-grey that the builders have come to call *kitchen*) — arranged in a slightly irregular cluster beneath her hull, the way a kitchen counter holds a small forest of empty vessels

waiting for flowers. The vases are made of fired clay, glazed and unglazed by turns, and they were crafted, individually, by potters along the Dutch coast — potters who had lost members of their families to the sea, and who had been invited by Nellij to make an object that would, in a small way, repay the sea by holding up something light and unreasonable above its surface.

The Vase-Footed Ark, accordingly, has a complicated relationship with grief. She is the only one of the pavilions whose foundations are explicitly memorial. Each of her eight vases bears a name, etched into its underside: the name of a person who was lost at sea by the family of the potter who shaped it. The names are not visible from above. The Ark stands on her grief, but does not display it.

The tulip-spirit who lives inside the Vase-Footed Ark is named **Tjalda**, who took the name from a great-grandmother who was a herring-merchant in the Wadden Islands. Tjalda is a serious flower. Tjalda uses the pronoun *zie* and *zir*, and Tjalda answers questions slowly and with particular care, as a person trained in matters of mourning will answer questions slowly and with particular care, regardless of the topic. Tjalda was, in fact, raised by a small commune of bulbs whose stated purpose was to keep the memory of the lost alive among the living tulips, and Tjalda has carried this purpose into adulthood. The Vase-Footed Ark is, in some sense, Tjalda's project; Tjalda asked that it be built; Nellij agreed, on the condition that the Ark be permitted to be, alongside its grief, also luminously cheerful.

This is what Tjalda has done. The upper deck of the Vase-Footed Ark is exuberant. It is dense with mixed tulips of every color the Netherlands has ever produced — red, pink, peach, white, butter-yellow, plum, blood-orange, the rare lilac-grey, the impossible black-burgundy known as *The Queen of the Night*. On the topmost ridge of the Ark, three tall sculptural tulips stand watch over the bloom — peach, vermilion, and pale teal — like the three Fates of a kinder mythology. Tjalda visits them each morning. Tjalda greets them. *Good morning, peach. Good morning, red. Good morning, teal.* The three sculptural tulips do not respond, being sculptural. Tjalda does not require a response. Tjalda is, by training, fluent in the conversation a person has with the silent.

The Ark crosses the water in a most unusual fashion. Because she stands on her vases, she cannot enter the water in the normal way. She is, instead, lifted in her entirety onto a great flat barge, which is itself towed across the Atlantic by a fleet of tugs. The vases are lashed to the barge with hempen rope and woolen padding. The Ark, throughout the crossing, remains standing — never afloat — and her eight clay vases bear the weight of the entire vessel from one harbor to the other, exactly as the lost have always borne the weight of the living.

When the Vase-Footed Ark arrives in New Amsterdam, she will be unlashed from the barge and set down, with great care, in a small public square that has been prepared for her. Tjalda will descend from the Ark, holding a single white tulip — the only white one Tjalda has ever permitted to grow on the deck — and place it at the foot of the central vase, the *kitchen*-colored one, on whose underside is etched the name of Tjalda's great-grandmother, the herring-merchant. *Tjalda has arrived,* zie will say, addressing the buried name. *Zie has brought zir family with zir.*

The crossing is in twelve days.

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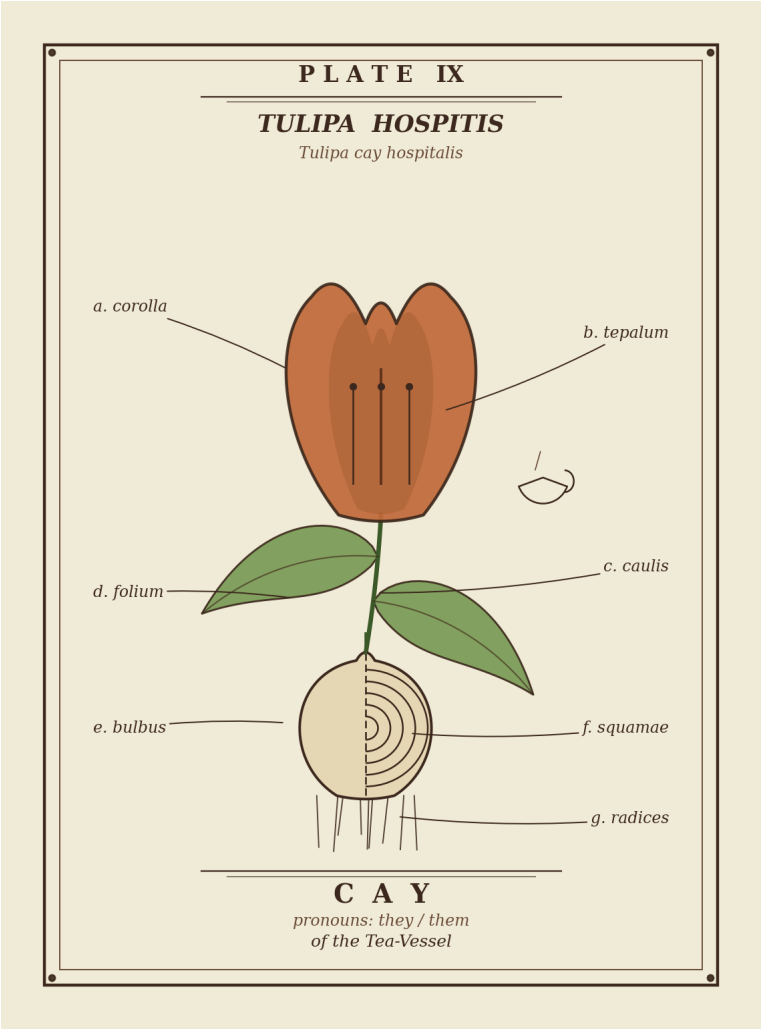
Plate IX
THE TEA-VESSEL



There is a pavilion in the shape of an enormous teapot.

I am aware that this sounds frivolous. I assure you it is not. The teapot is the most ancient of the welcoming forms, and the pavilion in question — the Tea-Vessel — has been built precisely to honor that ancientness. She is round of body, with a rounded yellow base and a softer yellow-and-white upper portion, scaffolded throughout with the open trellises that characterize all of these pavilions, and at her stern she sports a single great spout that arches outward over the water like the curved arm of a host offering a cup. At her crown there is a domed lid, terracotta-colored, surmounted by a small finial in the shape of a flame. From a distance, against the New Amsterdam skyline that is just visible behind her, she has the bearing of a kitchen object that has decided to become a civic landmark.

The fields at her base are dense with tulips of every available color — yellow, scarlet, pink, white, plum — laid out in long horizontal bands so that the entire foreground of the pavilion appears to be a vast woven rug of bloom. The Empire State Building is visible in the distance, much smaller than the teapot, which has the curious effect of making the famous tower appear modest, almost shy, in the presence of so much hospitality.

The tulip-spirit of the Tea-Vessel is **Çay**, whose name means *tea* in Turkish, in honor of the long Persian-Anatolian-Dutch route by which the original tulip-bulbs first reached the Low Countries. Çay uses the pronoun *they*, and Çay's entire life-project is hospitality. Çay has read every treatise on the subject available in the shipyard library: the Japanese tea ceremonies, the Bedouin coffee rituals, the Dutch *gezelligheid*, the Indian *atithi devo bhava — the guest is god* — and Çay has resolved, on the basis of all of them, that hospitality is the highest civic art, and that a vessel which arrives in a new harbor must arrive in the form of a teapot, because a teapot is the most legible promise a kitchen can make.

The Tea-Vessel will pour, on her arrival in New Amsterdam, an actual stream of tea. This has been engineered. The spout, which is hollow, will be connected to a small ceremonial cistern inside the hull, in which Çay has, over the course of the crossing, brewed a single enormous pot of tea using leaves that were grown in three different places: in a garden outside Amsterdam, in a windowbox in Surat, and in a public planter on West 23rd Street in Manhattan that is tended, in real life, by a woman named Dolores, whom Çay does not yet know. The tea will be poured into the harbor itself. It is intended to be a symbolic gesture rather than a beverage; the harbor has not consented to drink the tea, but the harbor has not declined either, and Çay considers the silence of the harbor to be a kind of cautious acceptance.

When the tea is poured, the citizens of New Amsterdam will be invited to dip cups into the water near the Tea-Vessel's spout and to drink. Most will. A few will decline, on grounds of taste or hygiene; Çay has prepared for this. There is, on the deck of the Tea-Vessel, a second cistern of fresh tea, separately brewed, which will be served in proper cups to anyone who would prefer not to drink from the harbor. *The point,* Çay has said, *is not the harbor and not the cup. The point is that two strangers should drink the same liquid at the same time, and afterward speak to each other.*

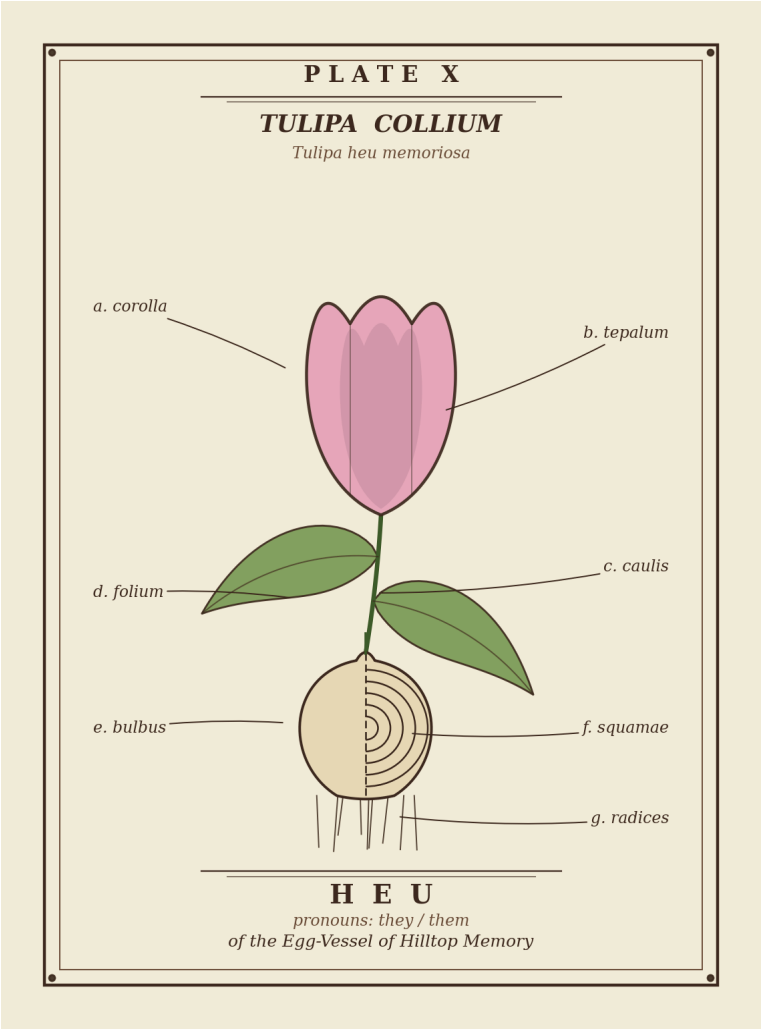
There is, on the Tea-Vessel, an additional small detail that I would like to record in this notebook because it pleases me. Each of the round portholes along her hull is fitted with a small white curtain — and behind each curtain, in a tiny cabin no larger than a closet, lives a single tulip. These tulips are not like Çay; they are not full tulip-spirits. They are something quieter — a kind of guest-tulip, a passenger-tulip, who has been offered a private room on the Tea-Vessel for the duration of the crossing and asked to do nothing in return except to bloom at the appropriate time. There are

forty-seven of them. They speak only to one another, and only at night, in voices so soft that not even Çay can quite hear them. The shipyard has elected not to know what they say. The shipyard has, on this matter, exercised the rare discipline of incuriosity.

The Tea-Vessel will lift in five days. Çay is excited. Çay has, in their cabin, a single china cup of unknown provenance, into which Çay intends to pour the first sip of the harbor-tea on arrival, and to drink it, and afterward to keep the cup forever, on the small shelf above their bed, as a souvenir of the day they first welcomed strangers in a new country.

~ ❦ ~

Plate X
THE EGG-VESSEL OF HILLTOP MEMORY



Among the most peculiar of the pavilions is one that does not, when first encountered, appear to be a vessel at all. It is an enormous yellow ovoid — egg-shaped, but on the scale of a building — set on a forest of wooden A-frame supports, surrounded on its lower surfaces by a vast pictorial mural of pink-blossoming hills, painted with such fidelity that the casual viewer believes, for several long moments, that they are looking at an actual landscape rather than at a vessel that has wrapped itself in one. Only when a small black porthole interrupts the mural — a little square eye through which a bulb-spirit might be looking out — does the viewer understand that the hills are painted, that the egg is a hull, and that the hull is preparing to depart.

This is the Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory. It is the most introverted of the pavilions. It is also, by some accounting, the saddest, though I would prefer to use the word *thoughtful*. Its design

principle is this: that a bulb who is leaving Amsterdam should be permitted to take, with them, a complete pictorial record of the landscape they are leaving, so that the leaving is a little less like an erasure. The mural that wraps the lower hull was painted, over the course of two years, by a collective of seventeen Dutch and Flemish painters who were given a single instruction by Nellij: *paint the hills you yourselves remember best.* They painted the soft pinks of cherry blossoms above the Maas, the rolling lavender slopes of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen in late summer, the apricot orchards of Brabant in May, and a small cluster of farmhouse roofs near Maastricht that one of the painters had grown up in and could not look at, even now, without weeping.

The mural is so detailed that you can see, in the painted distance, individual painted flowers; and on certain late afternoons, when the actual light catches the actual yellow paint of the hull above, the entire vessel appears to glow in the manner of a sunset — as if the hills themselves were lit by some private weather that the rest of the world had not been told about.

The tulip-spirit who lives inside the Egg-Vessel is named **Heu**, which is the dialectal Limburg word for *hay*. Heu uses *they* and *them*, and Heu was raised in a small village south of Amsterdam, in one of the very farmhouses that appears in the mural. Heu can point to it from the porthole. Heu does this often. *That is my house,* Heu says, gesturing to the painted square of orange roof on the painted hill. *I lived there until I was small enough to be a bulb again. I loved it. I am still loving it. I do not intend to stop.*

This is, perhaps, the most important sentence in the entire notebook.

The Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory is being built so that Heu can leave Amsterdam without committing the small theological violence of forgetting the hills they came from. Heu has said, more than once, that they are not interested in forgetting; that forgetting, in the migrant tradition Heu has come to understand, is a courtesy paid to the new country at the expense of the old country, and Heu is no longer willing to pay that courtesy. *I will love the new country,* Heu says, *as much as the new country can be loved. But I will love it without subtracting. I will not perform forgetfulness as the entrance fee.*

The mural on the hull is, accordingly, Heu's refusal of the entrance fee. It travels with the vessel. It will arrive in New Amsterdam still wrapped around the hull. The citizens of the new harbor will see, on the day of arrival, a great yellow egg upholstered in a Dutch landscape, and they will understand, immediately, that the bulb-spirit inside is bringing the hills with them, and that the hills are not for negotiation. The hills are not gifts. The hills are not on sale. The hills are an inheritance, and the inheritance is non-transferrable.

Heu does intend, however, to share one thing with the new country. On the day of arrival, Heu will plant — at the foot of the Egg-Vessel — a single tulip from the soil of the painted village. This

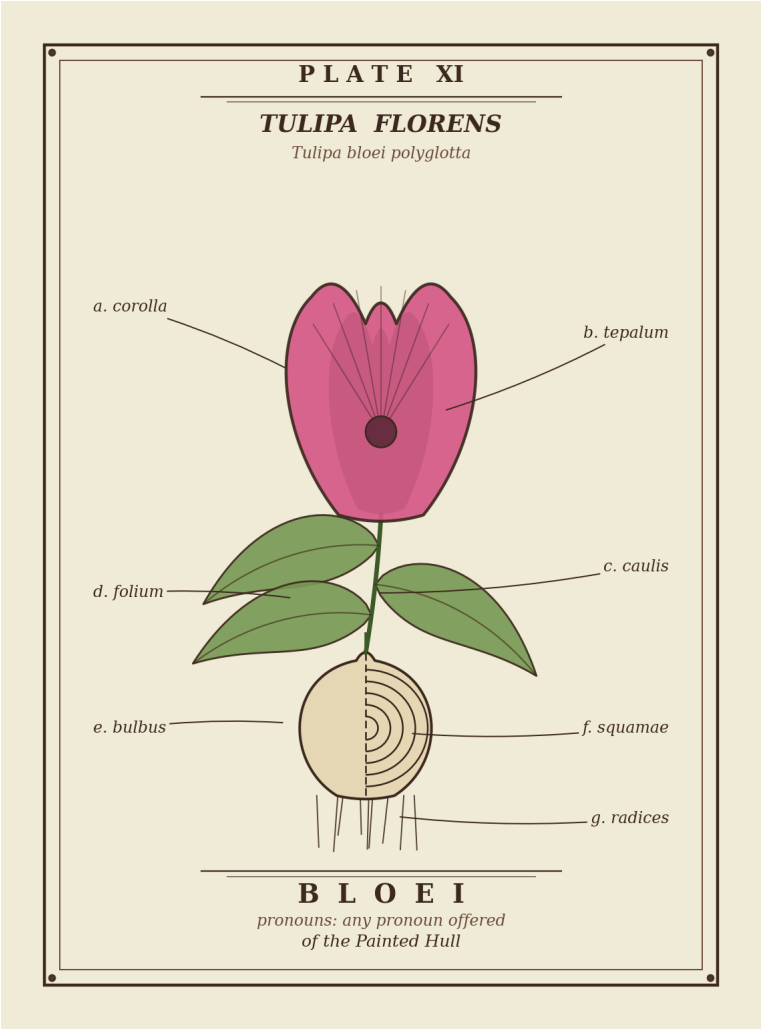
tulip will be permitted to root in the new soil. It will grow. It will, in some seasons, bloom. The hill it comes from will not have moved. But the hill it now lives in will, by the smallest degree, have learned to recognize the kind of pink that grew in the place Heu came from.

This is what Heu calls *teaching the new soil one of the old soil's words.*

The Egg-Vessel lifts in nine days.

~ ❦ ~

Plate XI
THE PAINTED HULL



If the Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory is the most introverted of the pavilions, the Painted Hull is its more public sibling. She is a large white ship, broader than tall, set on yellow trestles, surrounded by a low dust-colored pavement of what will eventually become a New Amsterdam loading-dock. Her hull is painted, top to bottom, with an enormous photographic-scale rendering of cherry-blossom trees in full pink bloom, lining a soft hill that recedes into a distance no observer can quite reach. Above the painted hill, the hull becomes a band of yellow, and above the yellow band there is a structure of deep coral-red wooden pavilions stacked across her crown — small houses, each with its own little roof, each connected to the others by wooden walkways and ladders, looking, in aggregate, like a high village that has been raised on a ship's back the way a saddle is raised on the back of a great patient animal.

The Painted Hull is designed for crowds. She is one of the few pavilions whose interior is meant to be entered by the public on arrival; the others are private, more or less, with the bulb-spirits' cabins reserved for the bulb-spirits and their immediate companions. The Painted Hull, by contrast, will be opened as a kind of welcome-house. Citizens of New Amsterdam will be invited to climb up to her crown, walk among the small coral-red houses on her deck, drink tea or cider in any of them, sit on small benches looking out toward the harbor, and read — if they wish — from a library of books that has been carried across the Atlantic in her belly: books in Dutch and English and Lenape and Spanish and Yiddish and Mandarin and Wolof and Bengali and three languages that are no longer spoken in any quarter of the world but which the Painted Hull's archivists have decided to honor by carrying them anyway.

The tulip-spirit of the Painted Hull is named **Bloei**, the Dutch word for *bloom*. Bloei is the most extroverted of the tulip-spirits, and Bloei uses any pronoun that is offered, with no preference. *Call me he,* Bloei has said. *Call me she. Call me they. Call me ze. Call me by the name of a flower you saw last week. I am promiscuous in my grammar because I am promiscuous in my hospitality. I will accept whatever pronoun you bring. I will return it, if you like, with a small amendment of my own.*

Bloei lives in the largest of the coral-red houses on the crown of the Painted Hull, the one in the very center, with windows on all four sides. From the windows Bloei can see, on a clear morning, the painted hill on the side of the hull below, the actual harbor of New Amsterdam in the distance, the actual Manhattan skyline, and a small painted detail near the bow that none of the other tulip-spirits has ever quite been able to find — a tiny painted figure of a child, no bigger than a thumbnail, walking up the painted hill with what appears to be a kite. Bloei knows where the child is. Bloei has never told anyone. Bloei believes that some images are sweeter for being privately known.

The Painted Hull's painted hull, to be precise about the matter, is not a memory like Heu's mural. It is something different. It is, Bloei has explained, a *forecast*. The hill on the side of the ship is not a hill from Amsterdam. It is a hill that does not yet exist. It is a hill the Painted Hull intends to grow, after arrival, in some form yet to be determined — perhaps in the form of a real garden in some New Amsterdam park, perhaps in the form of a series of cherry-blossom plantings up some real avenue, perhaps in the form of a metaphor that will spread through the city the way good news does. Bloei is not yet sure. Bloei has said only that the painted hill is a *prophecy in reverse* — a thing depicted before it has happened, in order that the new soil may begin practicing the hill's possibility.

This is, Nellij has admitted, an ambitious idea.

It is also, Nellij has said, the kind of idea that justifies the entire shipyard.

The Painted Hull will lift in twenty days, after the others. She is the largest of the public pavilions, and she requires the most careful weather. Bloei is patient. Bloei has the village on her crown, and the painted hill on her side, and the small library in her belly, and the tiny painted child with the kite — and Bloei has, also, the long sweet education of waiting, which Bloei believes is the most underrated of all the migrant arts.

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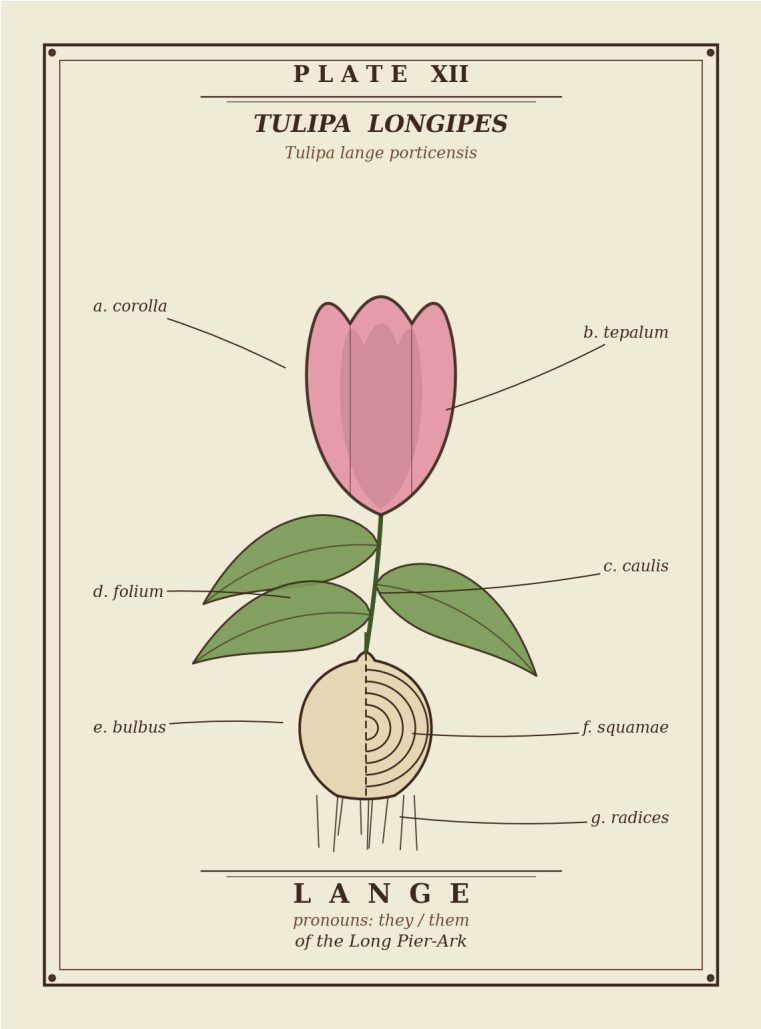
Plate XII
THE LONG PIER-ARK



The last of the crossing-pavilions is the longest. It is a horizontal vessel, more like a pier than a ship, set on a row of yellow scaffolded supports along the Hudson — an enormous rectangle of pale wood whose entire side is painted, in vivid photographic detail, with a continuous wall of pink cherry-blossom branches receding into a soft springtime haze. The blossoms cover most of the visible surface of the lower hull; the upper half is the warm color of unfinished pine. Yellow construction cranes rise from the deck like metal flowers. At the base, dozens of small support trusses meet the dock pavement, the way the legs of a long table meet the floor of a kitchen.

This is the Long Pier-Ark. She is, of all the pavilions, the most architectural — closer in scale and bearing to a public building than to a ship — and she has been designed to function, on arrival, as a permanent installation along the New Amsterdam waterfront. She will not be unloaded and

dismantled. She will become a piece of the city's infrastructure: a long covered promenade in which citizens may walk, in any season, beneath the perpetual painted blossoms of a spring that has chosen never to end.

The tulip-spirit of the Long Pier-Ark is named **Lange**, which is the Dutch word for *long*. Lange uses *they* and *them*, and Lange is a calm flower of long views and long sentences. Lange has the temperament of a ferry pilot — patient, lateral-thinking, with an ear for the small grievances of strangers. Lange's role on the Pier-Ark is to walk the length of it once each day, from end to end, greeting the bulbs that are quartered in cabins along the pier's hidden interior. There are eighty-three of these. Lange knows all of their names. Lange has, in their pocket, a small ledger in which Lange records what each bulb is currently thinking about. The ledger is updated daily. Lange does not share the ledger with anyone, including Nellij. *It is none of the shipyard's business,* Lange has said, *what eighty-three private bulbs are thinking about on any given Tuesday.*

The crossing of the Long Pier-Ark is, of all the crossings, the most institutional. Because the Pier-Ark cannot be lifted intact onto a barge — she is too long, too low — she is towed across the Atlantic in segments and reassembled on arrival. The segments are numbered. The reassembly takes three weeks. During those three weeks, Lange and the eighty-three bulbs live in temporary quarters on a smaller adjacent vessel, and they walk over each morning to inspect the slow stitching of the Pier-Ark back into its long horizontal self. This is, Lange has noted, a curious experience: to watch one's own home be reassembled in public, plank by plank, in a foreign harbor, with the new citizens watching.

It is also, Lange has noted, a slightly clarifying experience. *A house reassembled,* Lange says, *is a house that has had to remember itself. The reassembly is a kind of confession. The Pier-Ark is, for those three weeks, confessing to the new harbor what she is made of.*

The painted blossoms on the side of the Pier-Ark are, like Bloei's painted hill, a forecast — a promise of the perpetual spring the Pier-Ark intends to embody for the new city. The blossoms are not real. They are paint. But Lange has consulted with the harbor's groundskeepers, and they have agreed that, in the years following the Pier-Ark's installation, real cherry trees will be planted along the actual avenue that runs above the pier — so that, in time, the painted blossoms on the hull and the real blossoms in the avenue will rhyme each spring, in a slow agricultural duet, until the citizens of the city forget which one came first.

Lange thinks this is the proper kind of forgetting. It is not the forgetting of subtraction; it is the forgetting of fusion. The painted hill becomes the real hill becomes the painted hill becomes a fact about the city.

This, Lange has said, is what a migrant builds when a migrant builds well. *Not a separate thing in the new country,* Lange has said. *A new thing the new country had not yet known to be itself.*

The Pier-Ark lifts in fourteen days.

~ ❦ ~

INTERLUDE II

In which Surjan and the City consider the meaning of arrival

The City said: *Twelve pavilions described, and not one of them has yet docked.*

I said: *No. They are still at sea.*

She said: *I find that I am impatient. I find I want them to arrive. Is this a flaw in me?*

I said: *It is not a flaw. It is the proper condition of a harbor. A harbor is, by definition, the place that wants the ships.*

She said: *And the ships? Do they want the harbor?*

I said: *They want it more than they have agreed to admit. The desire is mutual. The bashfulness is also mutual.*

She said: *Tell me — when the pavilions arrive, what will I be expected to do?*

I said: *Almost nothing. You will be expected to be there. You will be expected to receive. You will be expected to allow the bloom to happen on your shoreline without insisting that it bloom in a particular pattern. You will be expected, more than anything, not to charge them rent.*

She laughed again. The laugh, this time, was the laugh of a person who has heard an old joke told well by a stranger.

She said: *I have been a city for a long time. I have not, in any of my centuries, charged a flower rent. I do not know whether that is a virtue or a failure of imagination, but I am willing to extend it to one more arrival.*

I said: *Then we may proceed. The pavilions are arriving. The reblossoming has begun. I would like to describe it to you, if you are ready.*

She said: *I have been ready since 1626.*

This time we both laughed. The laughter, between us, formed a small bright weather.

I began.

~ ❦ ~

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PART III — REBLOSSOMING

The pavilions in New Amsterdam, opening in the harbor as a public gift

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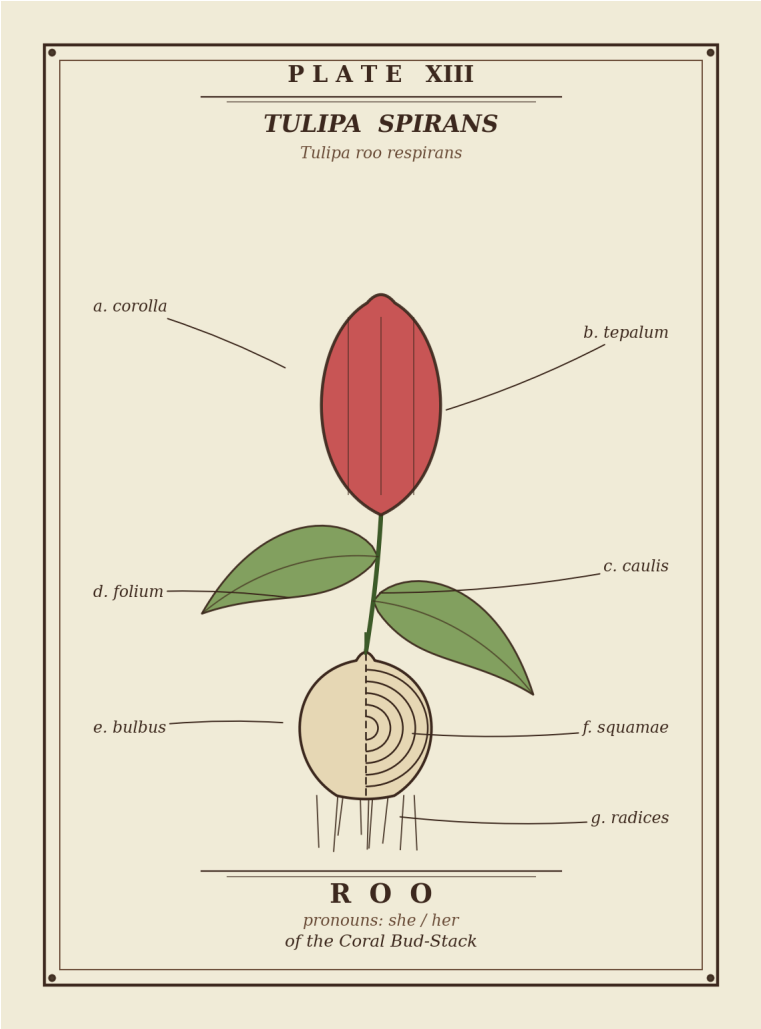
Plate XIII
THE CORAL BUD-STACK



The first of the pavilions to arrive, in the season I am describing, was the one we have come to call the Coral Bud-Stack. She entered the harbor on a clear blue morning, just after sunrise, with the Empire State Building visible in the distance and the harbor's water still tinged silver from the small chill of overnight, and she was — I will tell you the truth — the first vessel any of us had ever seen that breathed.

I do not mean this metaphorically. The Coral Bud-Stack has, on her uppermost deck, an enormous closed tulip-bud, perhaps thirty feet tall, painted in a deep coral red, sculpted from molded bronze and treated wood. The bud functions as a smokestack. It is hollow. The vessel's engines, throughout the crossing, vent their heat through the petals of this bud, and the warmed air emerges, in a slow plume, through the small unsealed seam at the bud's apex. The visual effect is that

the bud appears to exhale. On a windless morning, the plume rises straight up; on a breezy morning, it bends gently. From the dock, with the harbor below and the sky above, the Bud-Stack appears to be breathing, slowly, the way a sleeping animal breathes.

Beside the great central bud, smaller golden tulip-stacks rise — three or four of them, slimmer, also painted, also subtly venting — like attendant siblings flanking the eldest. The hull is yellow. Pink tulips grow in long terraces along the deck. The Empire State Building, behind her, looks slightly self-conscious in the way tall buildings sometimes do when a smaller, kinder structure has come to share their skyline.

The tulip-spirit of the Coral Bud-Stack is **Roo**, named for the deep coral pigment that dyes her petals and also for the older Dutch verb *roeren* — *to stir*. Roo uses the pronoun *she* and offers no apology for choosing a single pronoun; she has said that *she* is the pronoun she has been wearing all her life, that it fits her like a coat she has loved for many seasons, and that she is content not to take it off. She is not non-binary in the manner of the others. She is, instead, *transposed* — a flower who has, over many seasons, found her way into the pronoun she now wears, and who guards it gently, with the calm pride of a person who has been asked, far too often, to defend what she already knows about herself.

Roo's gift to New Amsterdam, on the morning of arrival, was the breathing. The Bud-Stack docked at a small quay in the harbor, and Roo asked the harbor pilots to leave the engines running for one full hour after docking. They agreed. For one hour, the great coral bud at the top of the vessel breathed slowly into the cold New Amsterdam morning, and the citizens who had come to the dock watched, and many of them began — without prompting, without ceremony — to breathe in time with it. The harbor was, for one full hour, breathing in unison with a flower.

A small child on the dock, witnessing this, asked her father what was happening. The father, who was not a poet, said: *I think the boat is teaching us how to breathe.* The child, who was three years old, said: *Or we are teaching it.*

This is the only piece of dialogue from the morning of the Coral Bud-Stack's arrival that I have permitted myself to record verbatim. The rest of the morning was quiet. The rest of the morning was simply the bud, breathing, and the harbor, breathing, and the building behind, looking modestly down.

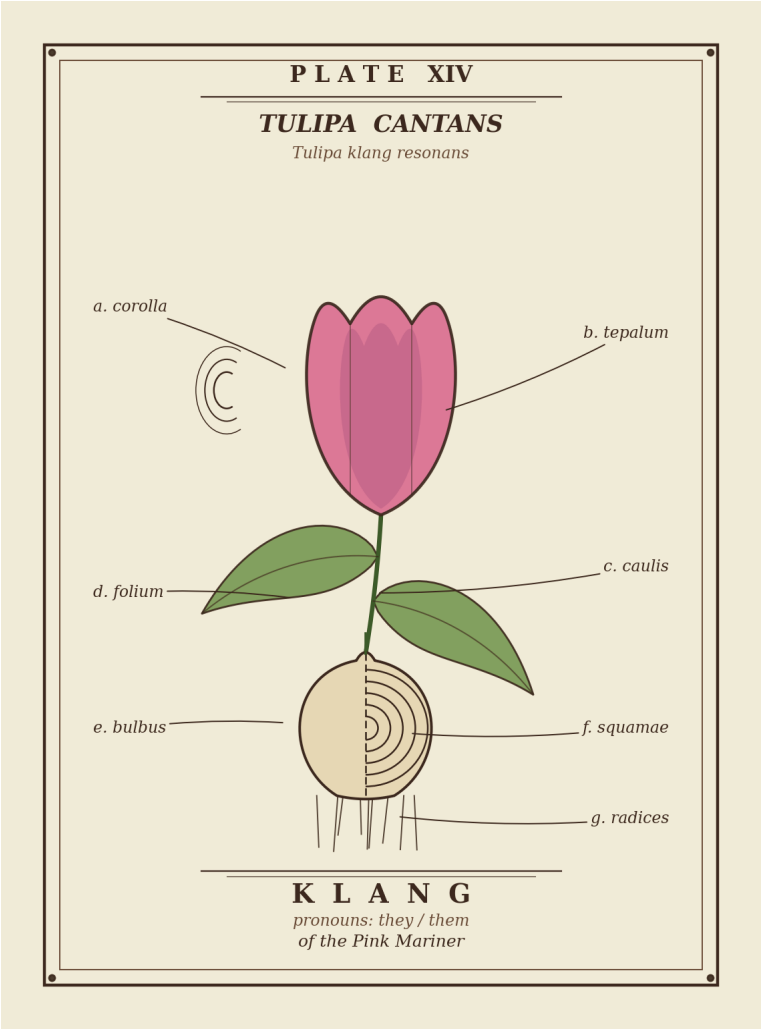
After the hour, Roo emerged onto the deck. She greeted the pilots. She greeted the small crowd at the dock. She thanked the harbor for receiving her. She invited the harbor, by way of a small folded paper note passed to the dockmaster, to send her, in return, a small object — anything at all — that might be considered a token of welcome. The dockmaster sent her a single oyster shell. She

kept it. It sits, now, in her cabin, beside her bed, in the small jewelry-bowl she had brought from Amsterdam.

Roo will, in the years that follow, become one of the most beloved of the new arrivals. She does not know this yet. The breathing was the first morning. The years are still ahead.

~ ❦ ~

Plate XIV
THE PINK MARINER



The second pavilion to dock was a long pink-hulled ship of unusual elegance, with a yellow-and-red upper deck and pale wooden scaffolding still wrapped along her midship, and at her rim a fringe of yellow tulips so vivid that it appeared to be a kind of golden eyelash, blinking in the morning light. The lower deck was painted in stripes of warm pink and pale buttermilk; the wheelhouse was crowned with a small bright yellow flag bearing no insignia. Behind her, the silver edge of the Empire State Building rose into the sky, as it had risen for the Coral Bud-Stack and as it would rise for all the others, the building making itself available as a discreet reference-point in the manner of a courteous old neighbor.

This was the Pink Mariner. She was the youngest of the larger pavilions; she had been built quickly, in the last six months of the project, by a team of builders who had felt, near the end of the

construction season, that the fleet was missing a particular tone — *something more like a singing voice*, one of them said. *Something that arrives, and the harbor immediately wants to applaud.* The Pink Mariner was the result.

The tulip-spirit of the Pink Mariner is named **Klang**, the German-Dutch word for *sound* or *resonance*. Klang uses the pronoun *they* and Klang's primary mode of being is musical. Klang sings. Klang sings constantly, softly, almost inaudibly, in a voice no human has been able to transcribe — a voice that the bulb-spirits insist is a real voice, with words and meaning, but that registers, to human ears, only as a kind of warm hum on the inside of the chest. People who stand near the Pink Mariner, even without knowing why, often find themselves humming. People who hum near the Pink Mariner often find themselves smiling. People who smile near the Pink Mariner often turn to a stranger and begin, without forethought, a small kind conversation.

This effect has been documented. It was documented before the Pink Mariner ever left Amsterdam. It is documented again, now, in New Amsterdam.

Klang's gift to the new harbor, on the morning of arrival, was a single sustained note — held for the entire duration of the Pink Mariner's docking process. The note lasted, by the harbor pilot's stopwatch, eleven minutes and forty-two seconds. It was not loud. It was simply continuous. The harbor, listening, found itself slowly relaxing — found that the small workplace anxieties of the morning, the missed buses and the spilled coffees and the unanswered emails, were, for the duration of the note, suspended. After the note ended, the harbor remained suspended for several additional seconds, the way a room remains lit for a moment after a candle has been blown out.

Then the Pink Mariner was docked. Klang emerged on deck. The crowd cheered, mildly, in the manner of a crowd that has been reminded that cheering is a thing it knows how to do.

Klang, on the deck, sang the first audible word the Pink Mariner has ever produced. The word was *yes*. The word was sustained for three seconds. The word was, on the basis of all available evidence, addressed to the harbor itself, and not to any individual person on the dock.

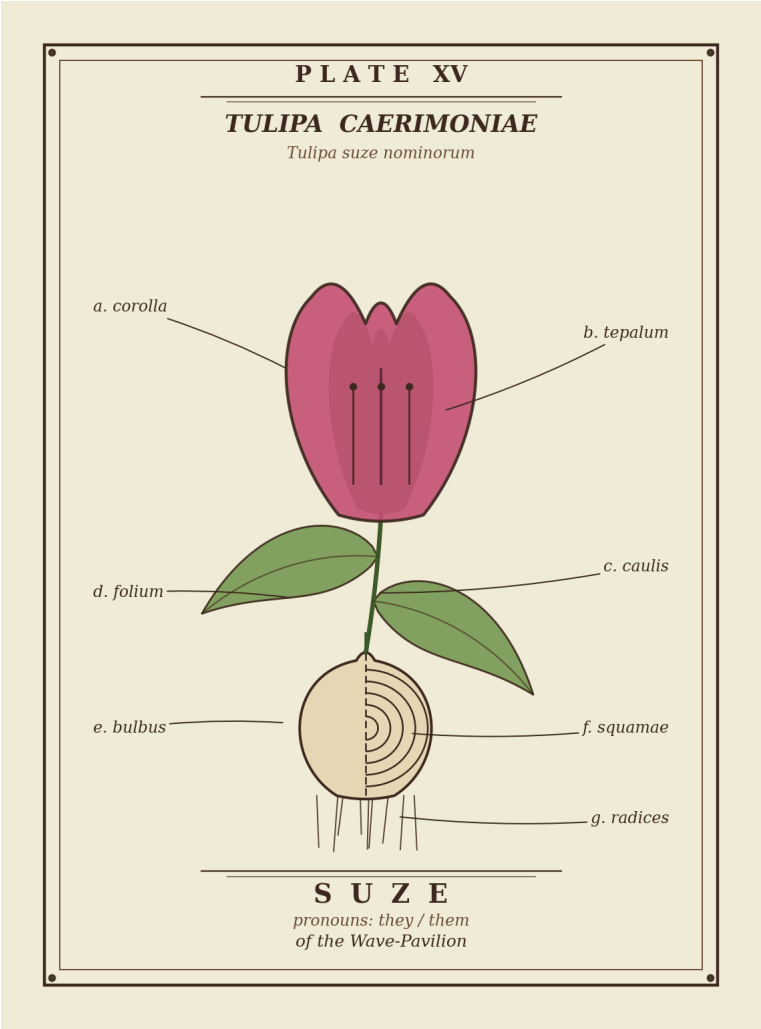
The harbor said *yes* back. It said it through the small bells on the docked tugs, which, by some coincidence of wind and tide, all rang at once.

Klang took this as a sufficient welcome. Klang has not, since, sung at full volume in public. Klang has continued to sing softly. The humming spreads, when Klang sings. The humming has begun to spread up the avenues, on certain afternoons, like a gentle weather front.

A few of the older residents of the city have remarked that the city has not felt like this in a long time. They have not been able to specify what *this* is. Klang, in their cabin on the Pink Mariner, knows what it is. Klang is content not to name it for them.

~ ❦ ~

Plate XV
THE WAVE-PAVILION



There is a building in the new harbor, set back slightly from the water on a flat stone plaza, that was once a vessel and is now a building. Its silhouette is the silhouette of a ship — a high yellow hull rising in a single sloping wave from prow to stern, like a wave caught at the moment of breaking — but it has been planted on the plaza permanently, on a wide rust-colored steel base, and it has been opened along its lower flank to reveal a vast horizontal print of a pink cherry-orchard in full bloom, mounted along the entire interior face of the lower hull. From a distance, the building appears to be a wave that is carrying a meadow inside it.

This is the Wave-Pavilion. She arrived in New Amsterdam folded and crated, in nineteen separate sections, on the deck of a freighter, and was reassembled on the plaza over the course of a single intense week by Nellij and a team of local builders who had volunteered for the project. The

pink-meadow print was the last piece installed. The morning it was unveiled, the harbor mist had not yet burned off, and from a certain angle the print appeared to extend, dreamily, into the actual harbor beyond — as if a real cherry-orchard had floated, briefly, on the surface of the water, before being captured and pressed into the wall of the pavilion.

The tulip-spirit of the Wave-Pavilion is **Suze**, who took the name from a small cousin who had died young. Suze uses the pronoun *they*, and Suze is the most ceremonial of the spirits — the one most attentive to ritual, to anniversary, to the small private liturgies by which a person honors a memory. Suze maintains, in their cabin at the apex of the wave, a single shelf of objects that belonged to the small cousin: a wooden top, a comb, a child's drawing of a rabbit, a tiny brass bell. Each object has its day. Each object is taken down on its day, dusted, held, returned. The shelf is, in this way, less a shelf than a small kind of calendar — a calendar in which time is measured not in months but in objects.

Suze's gift to New Amsterdam was a public ritual. On the morning the Wave-Pavilion was completed, Suze stood at the pavilion's prow and read aloud — to no one in particular, addressing the harbor at large — a long list of names. The names were the names of those who had been lost during the various crossings throughout the long history of crossings: Dutch sailors, African captives, Lenape children, Irish stowaways, Jewish refugees, Italian masons, Vietnamese fishers, Syrian doctors. The names were not all that history had recorded; many crossings did not record names, and many names that were recorded have since been lost. Suze read what could be read, in alphabetical order, for one hour. After the hour, Suze stopped, and stood for a long while with their head bowed, and then said, simply: *We have not finished. We will not finish. Let the unread names hum.*

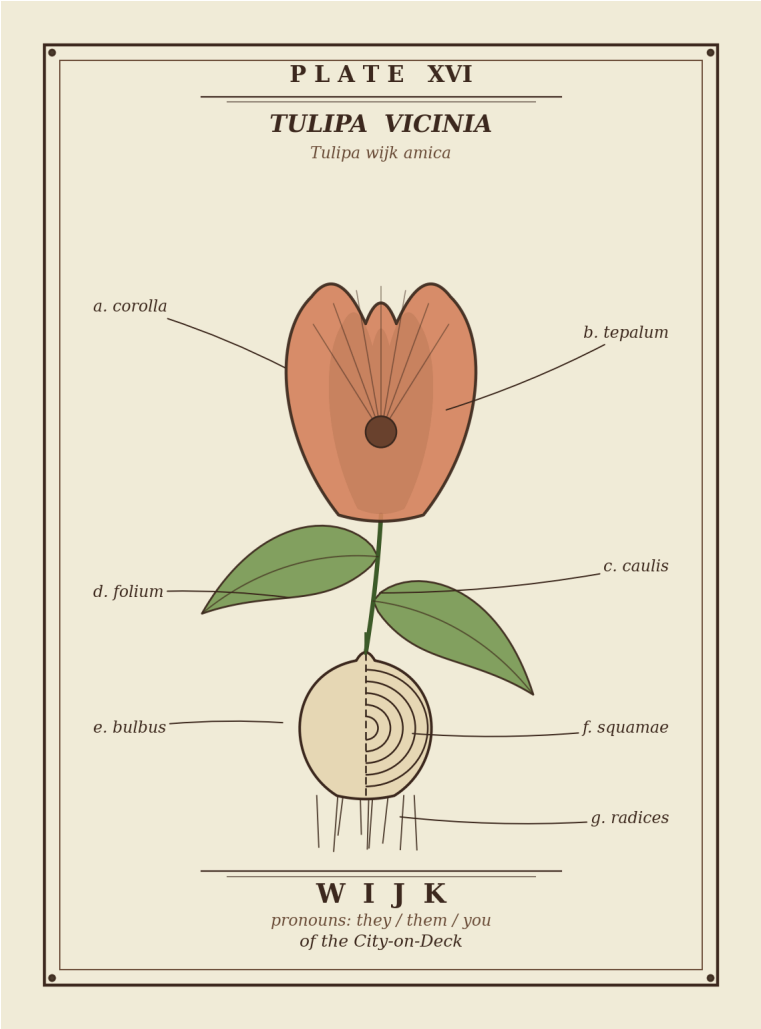
This last line, *let the unread names hum*, has since been engraved on a small brass plaque set into the floor of the Wave-Pavilion, near the threshold. Visitors who enter the pavilion often pause at the plaque. Visitors who pause at the plaque often touch it with their fingers. Visitors who touch the plaque often, afterward, walk into the pavilion's interior — past the wave-shaped hull, past the long meadow-print on the inner wall — in a slightly different posture than the one they had on entering. The pavilion has been observed to make people taller for a little while.

Suze does not advertise this. The pavilion, Suze believes, must do its own work. Suze's role is only to be there, on the shelf, with the wooden top and the comb and the rabbit-drawing and the brass bell, on the appropriate days of the appropriate months. The pavilion will speak to the harbor without Suze's further help.

The Wave-Pavilion is, in the seasons since its arrival, the most visited of the pavilions. It is also the quietest. Visitors, instinctively, lower their voices on entering. The pavilion has the dignity of a building that knows what it is.

~ ❦ ~

Plate XVI
THE CITY-ON-DECK



There is a pavilion on the New Amsterdam waterfront which carries, on its yellow upper deck, an entire small village of wooden houses. The houses are arrayed across the deck in the manner of a hill town — irregular, charming, connected by little stairs and walkways and shared courtyards — and their roofs are pitched and slatted, their walls are pink-orange and pale yellow, their windows are small, and their chimneys are real chimneys that, in the colder months, send up real smoke. From the harbor, looking up at this pavilion, one sees a long pale-pink hull, painted with photographic-scale orchards along its broadside, and above the hull a town of perhaps fifteen or twenty houses, looking out over the water with the dignified curiosity of a settlement that has agreed, by general assembly, to live on a ship's back.

This is the City-on-Deck. She is the most populous of the pavilions. The little houses on her upper deck are, in fact, occupied — by small bulb-families, by the families of the builders who chose to make the crossing, by a few of the harbor pilots who have taken sabbaticals from their duties, and by a small commune of artists from the New Amsterdam art-school who applied for residency and were accepted. The City-on-Deck has therefore become, since her arrival, a true small village — perhaps the only village on a ship in the entire harbor, and certainly the only one with chimneys.

The tulip-spirit of the City-on-Deck is named **Wijk**, the Dutch word for *quarter* or *neighborhood*. Wijk uses the pronoun *they* in formal settings and *you* in casual ones — a habit Wijk picked up from a building-crew foreman in Rotterdam who used *you* for everyone, including themselves, on the grounds that *you* was the most democratic of the available pronouns. Wijk is fond of this practice. Wijk has explained that *you*, when used self-referentially, has the curious effect of placing the speaker in the same grammatical position as the listener, which Wijk believes is the proper relation for a host. *When you welcome someone,* Wijk has said, *you must briefly become them. Otherwise the welcome is from above, and a welcome from above is not a welcome.*

Wijk lives in the largest of the houses on the City-on-Deck — a peach-roofed cottage near the prow, with a bright yellow door and a window-box of mixed tulips of every description. From this window-box, on summer afternoons, Wijk observes the goings-on of the small village they have midwifed. They watch the children play in the central courtyard. They watch the artists paint on their small balconies. They watch the chimneys smoke. They watch, in the late afternoons, the small private dramas of people who have agreed, by accident and on purpose, to live in close proximity for the foreseeable future.

Wijk does not interfere. Wijk is, in the deepest sense, a host who has understood that hosts must withdraw at the right moment. *A host who hovers,* Wijk has said, *has confused the dinner with the dinner-party. The dinner is the food. The dinner-party is the fact that the food has been left to its own devices in the company of strangers.*

Wijk's gift to New Amsterdam was the village itself. On the day of the City-on-Deck's arrival — after she had been towed to her permanent mooring, after the gangways had been lowered, after the first inhabitants had walked up to inspect their new houses — Wijk stood at the prow and made a single brief announcement: *The houses are unfinished on purpose. You are invited to finish them. We have left this work for you.*

The harbor's citizens spent the next three months finishing the houses. They added shutters. They painted doors. They built porches. They installed window-boxes. They negotiated with one another over the placement of small communal benches. They argued, briefly and warmly, over the

question of whether the central courtyard should have a fountain. (It does. The fountain is a tulip.) By the end of the first summer, the City-on-Deck had become — without anyone having decreed it — the friendliest neighborhood in the new city.

This was, of course, the entire point. Wijk had understood, all along, that the way to welcome a city is to give it something to do.

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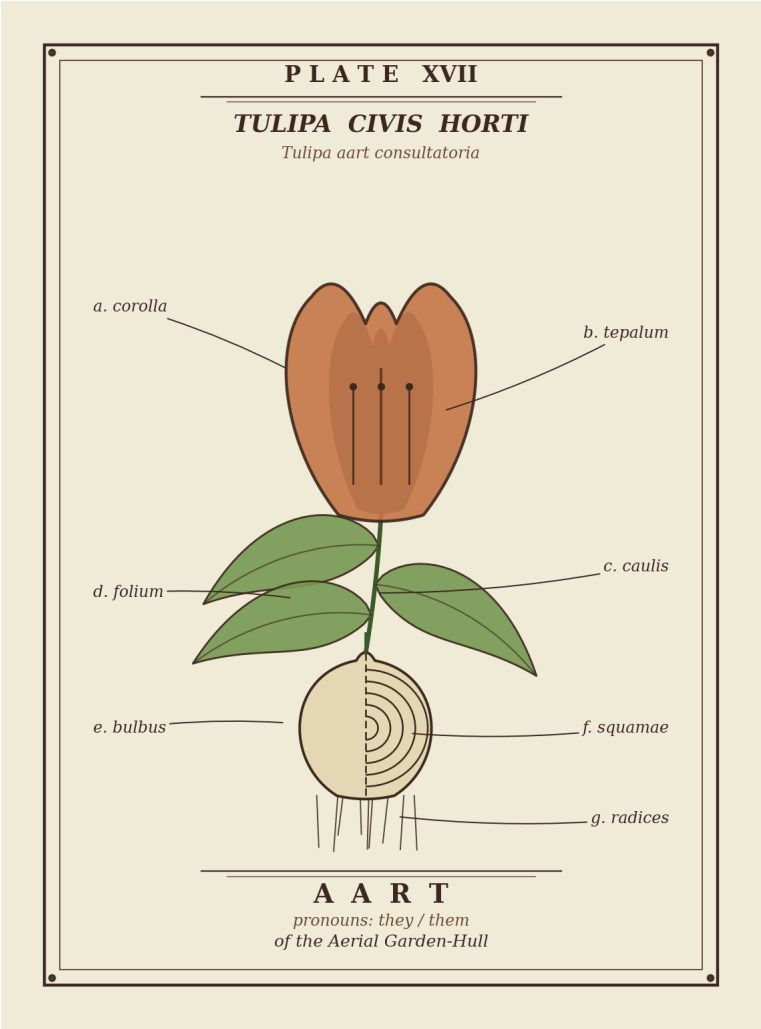
Plate XVII
THE AERIAL GARDEN-HULL



There is a pavilion that does not, when first encountered, appear to be one vessel but several. From above — from the air — it has the bearing of a vast horizontal terrace garden divided by long curving valleys and ridges, planted in great fields of yellow and pink, with a small canyon of warm wood running through its center where a long building has been set, like a corridor cutting the meadow in two. From below — from the harbor — only the pale curving sides of the hull are visible, and the long silver flank of a Manhattan office tower behind it, and the suggestion, above the rim, of an enormous bloom that the eye cannot quite reach but knows is there.

This is the Aerial Garden-Hull. She is the largest of the pavilions, by surface area, and the most directly devoted to the cultivation of tulips. Her upper deck is a working farm. Her interior is a series of greenhouses and germination labs, in which bulbs from many countries are studied, propagated,

and prepared for redistribution into the wider city. Her engineering is unprecedented. She is the only one of the pavilions whose practical purpose, after arrival, is *agricultural* — and she is, by extension, the most important to the long-term project, because she is the pavilion that ensures that the bloom in New Amsterdam will not be a single ceremonial event but a recurring annual practice.

The tulip-spirit of the Aerial Garden-Hull is named **Aart**, after a Dutch agronomist who lived in the eighteenth century and who first proposed — gently, in a small treatise that almost no one read — that the tulip might be considered, in some moral sense, a *citizen* of the garden it grew in, with rights to consultation about the soil. Aart-the-spirit uses the pronoun *they*, and Aart's whole project is the cultivation of those rights. Aart consults, in a manner of speaking, with each bulb planted on the deck of the Aerial Garden-Hull. Aart asks each bulb, before planting, what kind of soil it prefers, what kind of company it would welcome in the adjacent rows, what time of morning it would like to be watered. The bulbs answer in their own way. Aart has become, over many seasons, a fluent reader of bulb-language, which is mostly a matter of observing the angle at which a bulb leans on its first day in the soil, and the speed at which its first leaf opens.

Aart's gift to New Amsterdam was, accordingly, agricultural. On arrival, Aart presented to the harbor's groundskeepers a complete catalogue of the bulbs aboard — twenty-three thousand of them, of three hundred and forty-one varieties — along with a planting plan, prepared in consultation with the bulbs themselves, that proposed where each one should be installed across the public parks of the city. The catalogue was beautifully bound. Each bulb was described with three lines: a name, a soil preference, and a sentence about its temperament. The grumpy ones were marked. The ones with strong opinions about adjacent neighbors were noted. The ones that preferred to be planted alone were given special care.

The groundskeepers, who were professionals, found this catalogue almost unbearably charming. Several of them wept. One of them, in an emotional moment, agreed with Aart that the bulbs should henceforth be considered, formally, *citizens of the parks*, with the corresponding right to be consulted about any major changes to their flower-beds. This is now the standing policy of the New Amsterdam Parks Department. It is not widely advertised. The bulbs do not require advertising. The bulbs only require that their preferences be honored.

The Aerial Garden-Hull, in the years since her arrival, has produced bloom after bloom in the public parks of the new city. The blooms have been increasingly diverse — increasingly polychromatic, increasingly textured, increasingly the kind of bloom that a casual passer-by stops to look at — and the citizens of the new harbor have begun, without fully understanding why, to associate the spring with a particular feeling of being personally welcomed by a flower. The feeling is

correct. The feeling has been engineered. Aart has worked very hard for the feeling to be exactly that.

This is, of course, the most subtle gift in the whole notebook. It does not announce itself. It only blooms.

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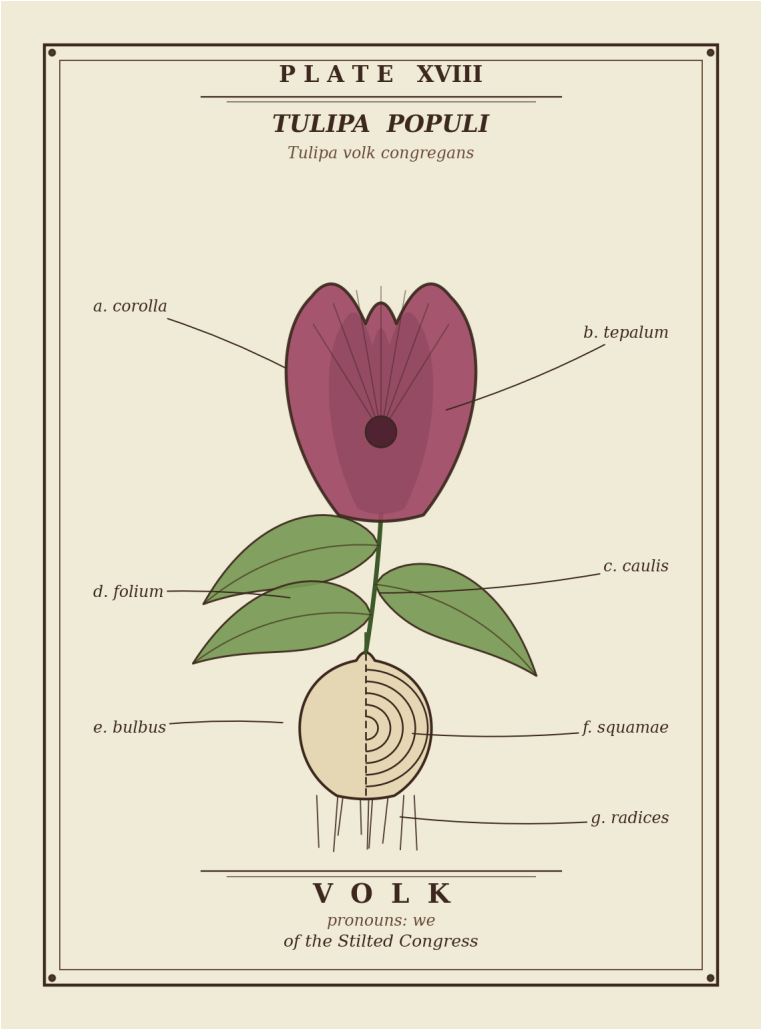
Plate XVIII
THE STILTED CONGRESS



There is a vessel in the new harbor that stands, like the Vase-Footed Ark, on legs — but its legs are not vases; they are slender wooden stilts, hundreds of them, arranged in long parallel rows, holding the broad horizontal hull aloft above the harbor's edge. Beneath the hull, in the long shaded space the stilts make, you can walk; you can pause; you can look up at the underside of the vessel, which is unpainted, and see the plain honest carpentry of a thing built well. Above, on the deck, gathered into long tiered platforms, stand many hundreds of small figures — citizens, you slowly realize, citizens of a kind, gathered to look out over the bow toward the harbor and the long stretch of yellow and pink tulip-fields that runs down to the water and toward Manhattan in the smoky distance.

This is the Stilted Congress. She is the largest of the public pavilions and the most populous on the day of her arrival. The figures on her deck are not the bulb-spirits and not the city's residents and not the artists from the school; they are something else. They are the *delegates of the bloom* — small wooden carved figures, made by a guild of carvers in the Frisian islands, each representing a single arrival in the long history of arrivals to the harbor. There are figures with sailors' caps. There are figures with babies. There are figures with traveling cases. There are figures with empty hands. There are figures with prayer-shawls and figures with rosaries and figures with tobacco-pipes and figures with violins and figures with nothing but their own faces. There are several thousand of them. Each one represents one person who arrived in this harbor, at some point in the last four hundred years, and who became, in some way, part of the city.

The figures are arranged on the tiered platforms of the Stilted Congress's deck the way a great civic assembly might be arranged for a portrait. They look out over the harbor together. They are all looking, more or less, in the same direction. They do not move. They are not meant to move. They are meant only to constitute, by their presence, a kind of standing visible record — a parliament of the arrived.

The tulip-spirit of the Stilted Congress is named **Volk**, the Dutch word for *people*. Volk uses the pronoun *we* exclusively, in all grammatical positions, including when speaking on their own behalf. *We have considered the question. We are content. Speak to us, and we will hear you.* Volk has explained that *we* is the only pronoun appropriate to a flower whose vessel carries several thousand carved figures of the arrived. *We do not speak for ourselves alone,* Volk has said. *We speak for the assembly. We are a delegate, not a voice.*

Volk lives in a small cabin set into the prow of the Stilted Congress, just above the foremost row of carved figures. From this cabin Volk can see, on a clear day, the entire deck of figures, the harbor, the long yellow-and-pink tulip-fields between the Congress and Manhattan, and the city itself, lying in soft smoky pastel along the far horizon. Volk spends most of their time looking. Volk has very little to say.

Volk's gift to New Amsterdam was the parliament. On the morning of the Stilted Congress's arrival, the carved figures were unveiled to the harbor; and on every subsequent anniversary of an arrival — any arrival, any year, any country — a citizen of the new city is invited, by the harbormaster, to climb up to the deck of the Congress, find the figure that represents that arrival, and place a small fresh tulip at its feet. The figures, accordingly, are surrounded most of the year by small tulips. The deck of the Stilted Congress has come to be known, in the local parlance, as *the little parliament*. People propose to one another there. People scatter ashes there. People go there alone to think about whether they belong to a city, and they come down again with a slightly clearer answer.

Volk, in the cabin, watches all of this. Volk says nothing, mostly. When Volk does speak, it is in the plural, and it is brief. The most recent thing Volk was overheard to say, on the deck of the Stilted Congress at sundown on the first anniversary of arrival, was: *We are glad to be here. We were always going to be here. The route was unclear. The arrival was not.*

This sentence has been engraved on a small wooden plaque set into the railing of the Congress, where the harbor wind catches it. It is read often, by citizens, and not always understood. It is, however, frequently believed — which is, in the long run, the more important condition.

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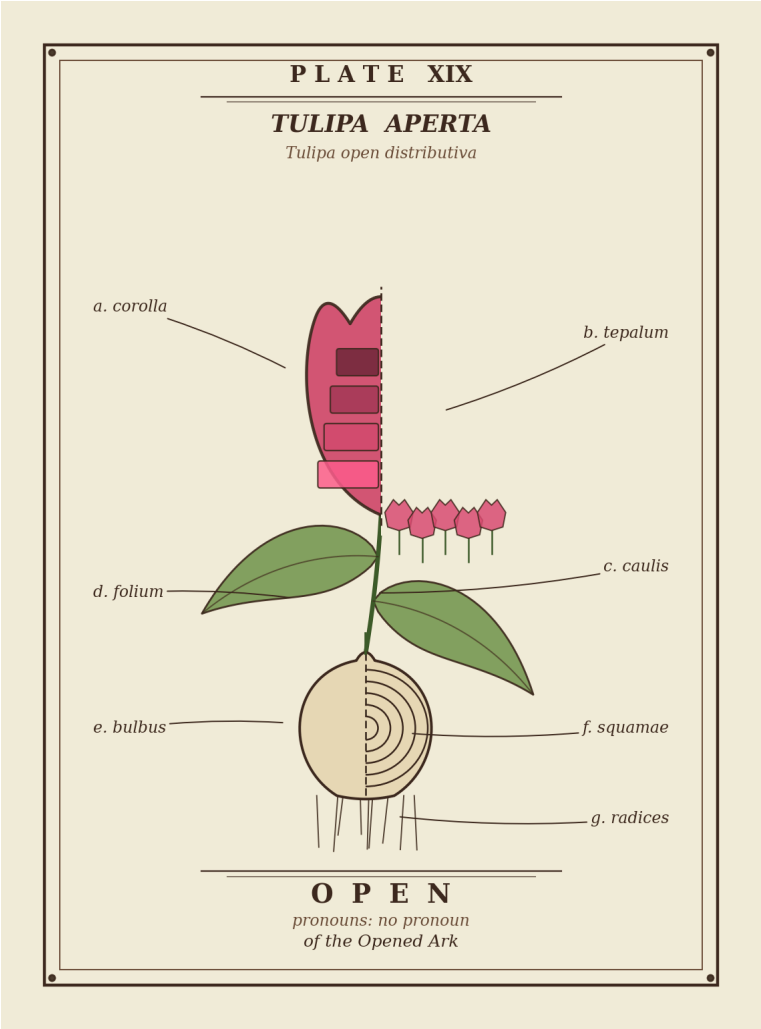
Plate XIX
THE OPENED ARK



The last of the pavilions has, in its way, become the symbol of all the others. It is the only one of the nineteen that arrived already opened — its hull cleaved in a great vertical seam from rim to keel, the cut neatly dressed in pale wood, the interior fully exposed to the harbor — and from the cleaved interior, like the layered cut face of an enormous bloom-fruit, pours an entire stratified geology of tulips: pale yellow at the top, fading down through coral and pink and rose-orange and deep magenta, and at the bottom, where the cut meets the dock, a slow flood of mixed tulips spilling out across the pavement of the harbor like a river that has run, finally, where it always wanted to run.

This is the Opened Ark. She is the final image of this notebook, and the only one I will permit myself to describe at any length, because I believe that the meaning of all the other pavilions is collected in her.

She arrived in New Amsterdam already cut. The cleaving had been performed in the mid-Atlantic, mid-crossing, by Nellij and a small team of carpenters, using a method that I will not attempt to describe technically. The decision to cleave the Ark, mid-water, had been made years before, in a long evening's conversation in the shipyard, in which Nellij had argued — over the objections of several of the bulb-spirits — that one of the pavilions must arrive *already given. The other pavilions arrive whole,* Nellij had said. *They arrive intact. They arrive as proposals for welcome. But one of them must arrive as the welcome itself. One of them must be already opened, already pouring, already past the moment of decision. Otherwise the bloom is only a future, and a city cannot live entirely on the future of its bloom.*

This argument was, eventually, persuasive. The Ark was built with cleaving in mind. The seam was reinforced. The carpenters were trained. On the agreed-upon morning, in the middle of the Atlantic, the Ark was cleaved; the bulbs in the upper hold were rearranged into the cleaved face in their stratified yellow-to-magenta gradient; the cut surfaces were dressed; and the Ark, now in the form of an enormous bloom-fruit cut open, completed her journey to the harbor.

The tulip-spirit of the Opened Ark is named **Open**, simply. Open uses no pronoun at all. Open has explained that, having become already opened, Open no longer experiences the grammatical need for a private referent. *I have been distributed,* Open has said, *into the people who are receiving me. The pronoun is now in their hands. Whichever pronoun they offer me back, I will accept. I have given over the privilege of refusal.*

This is the most radical theological position taken by any of the tulip-spirits in this notebook.

It is also, in some sense, the most tender. Open has not been *forced* into this position. Open has *chosen* it. Open elected, before the lifting from Amsterdam, to be the one who would travel as the gift rather than as the gift-bearer. The other pavilions arrive as hosts. The Opened Ark arrived as the meal.

The harbor received Open with the kind of stunned silence a city reserves for a thing it has not understood it was about to be given. The dockmaster, who had been preparing for arrival, found himself unable to speak for several minutes. The harbor pilot, on the small boat that had escorted the Ark in, sat down on the deck of the small boat and put his face in his hands. The crowd at the dock — which had grown, over the morning, to perhaps several thousand — watched in silence as the cut hull was towed past them, slowly, the layered face of bloom turned outward, the river of mixed tulips spilling onto the pavement.

A child in the crowd — the same three-year-old, perhaps, who had spoken at the docking of the Coral Bud-Stack, or perhaps another child entirely — said, in a small clear voice that carried farther than it should have: *That is everyone.*

The adults on the dock were, briefly, unable to disagree. They looked at the cut hull and the river of bloom and the small wooden seam where the cleaving had been dressed, and they understood, in the way a person understands a thing only once, that the child was right. The Opened Ark was everyone. It was every bulb that had ever been moved from one ground to another, every body that had ever consented to be transplanted, every refugee, every guest, every adopted child, every late-arriving spouse, every neighbor who had not been expected and who turned out to be the kindest person on the block. The Ark had arrived in the form of all of them at once, cleaved open, spilling.

The river of tulips reached the edge of the pavement and continued onto the avenue. The harbor, by general agreement, did not stop it. The avenue, by general agreement, became, for a few hours, a flower-river. The citizens of the city, by general agreement, walked alongside it.

Open did not appear on the deck. Open had no deck to appear on. Open had become, by the design of the cleaving, distributed throughout the spilling bloom, and Open was being received, simultaneously, by every citizen who passed near the river. *Hello,* Open was, in some way, saying to each of them. *Hello. I am the welcome. I have already happened. Walk with me. The harbor has agreed. The avenue has agreed. The city has agreed. All are welcome here.*

This is the last sentence of the notebook proper.

The catalogue, the map, and the afterword follow.

~ ❦ ~

CODA

In which Surjan and the City take leave of one another

The City said: *Nineteen pavilions. The avenue is full of bloom. The harbor is full of breathing. The little parliament has begun to hold its anniversaries. I find that I am, for the first time in some centuries, slightly overwhelmed.*

I said: *Is the overwhelm welcome?*

She said: *Yes. It is the right kind. It is the overwhelm of being hosted.*

I said: *I had wondered, when I began describing the pavilions to you, whether you might find the abundance excessive. Whether nineteen was too many. Whether the harbor would feel crowded.*

She said: *The harbor cannot be crowded. The harbor is not a room. The harbor is a willingness. A willingness has no maximum capacity.*

This sentence has stayed with me. I would like to record it, here, as the thesis-statement of the entire notebook. *A willingness has no maximum capacity.* If anything in this book has been a teaching, that sentence is the teaching.

The City said: *And you, Surjan? What now? You have built nineteen pavilions in your notebook. The pavilions have arrived. The bloom has begun. What is left for you?*

I said: *I do not know.*

She said: *That is the correct answer.*

I said: *I think I will rest. I think I will sit on a bench in one of the new parks. I think I will be quiet for several seasons.*

She said: *You will be welcome to sit on any of my benches. I will keep the benches warmer than the official ordinances require.*

I laughed. The laugh, this time, was the laugh of a person who has been received.

She said: *Will you come back, eventually? Will there be more pavilions?*

I said: *I think there will be. I think there are always more pavilions, in any builder's notebook. I think the work is never finished. But I will come back as a different builder. Whoever I am next, when I come back — I will not be the one who built these.*

She said: *Of course not. The pavilions made you, also. You did not only make the pavilions.*

This is the truest sentence in the conversation. It is the sentence that ended the conversation. The City, after speaking it, was quiet for a long while, and I was quiet alongside Her, and the harbor was quiet alongside both of us, in the way that a harbor is quiet when its work for the season is done.

After a long while, She said: *Goodbye, Surjan.*

I said: *Goodbye, City.*

I closed the notebook.

The pavilions remained.

~ ❦ ~

AFTERWORD

I want to tell you, before this book closes, that I almost did not write it.

I am thirty-eight years old. I have been non-binary all of my life, in some form, though I have only had the words for it since I was twenty-six, and I have only had the confidence to wear the words in public since I was thirty-one. I have, in my life so far, made one great crossing — from a country I will not name in this book, because the naming would be its own small theft — to the country I now live in, and which I have been calling, in these pages, New Amsterdam, though I am aware that the name is older than my arrival here and will outlive my departure. I crossed the water. I was given a new soil. I rooted, with difficulty, and then with less difficulty, and now with the kind of ease a bulb has when it has been in its new bed for several seasons and has stopped checking, every morning, whether the soil is still there.

I almost did not write this book because I was afraid. I was afraid that a happy book about migration would be misread as a denial of how hard migration is. I was afraid that a happy book about being non-binary would be misread as a denial of how much non-binary people are still asked to argue for our own existence. I was afraid that a happy book, in this season of the world, would be misread as a kind of looking-away.

I would like, here, to address those fears.

A happy book is not a denial. A happy book is a *practice*. The practice is the practice of writing what is also true. It is true that migration is hard. It is also true that migration ends, sometimes, in the kind of arrival the Opened Ark embodies. It is true that being non-binary is, in many places, still difficult. It is also true that I have, in my own life, been welcomed into rooms by strangers who used my pronouns correctly the first time, without comment, the way a host hands a guest a glass of water. It is true that the world is on fire in many places. It is also true that, in many other places, the world is quietly putting itself back together with kindness and patience, and that the putting-back-together has been happening, in fact, for a long time, and was happening before any of us noticed, and will continue to happen after we have died and been forgotten and then remembered again.

I have written about the second set of truths, in this book, because the first set is well-served by other books. I have written about welcome because welcome is what I have, in fact, been given. I have written about flowering because I have, in fact, flowered. I have written about the harbor because the harbor is, in fact, here. I am writing this sentence, today, on a bench in a new park in the new city, and the bench is warm, and a tulip is open about three feet from my left shoe, and a

stranger walked by ten minutes ago and smiled at me without explanation. The stranger is gone. The smile is still here. I am writing in the company of the smile.

This is what the tulips taught me, over the course of the years it took to build this notebook. They taught me that the lifting is real. They taught me that the crossing is real. They taught me that the reblossoming is real, that it can be relied upon, that it is not the special privilege of a few but the available inheritance of everyone who is willing to be transplanted, and that the willingness is its own form of bloom. They taught me — Heu taught me, specifically — that I do not have to forget where I came from in order to love where I now live. They taught me — Open taught me, specifically — that the most generous thing a body can do is to arrive already given. They taught me — Volk taught me, specifically — that *we* is the proper pronoun for any flower whose vessel carries the names of those who came before. They taught me — the City, specifically — that a willingness has no maximum capacity.

If you have read this far, I would like to thank you. I would like to leave you with a small instruction, for whatever crossing you are currently making, or about to make, or have just finished making, or are not yet ready to admit you are making.

The instruction is this: *let your scaffolding be visible. Let your bloom be public. Let your arrival be unhurried. Let your soil be honored. Let your hill come with you. Let your pronouns be your own. Let the harbor be the kind of harbor that does not charge you rent. Let yourself be the kind of arrival that the harbor was, in some quiet way, already waiting for.*

I will be writing more pavilions. I will not be the same builder when I return. I wish you a long, kind season.

— *Surjan, on a bench, in the late afternoon, with one tulip open about three feet from the left shoe*

~ ❦ ~

CATALOGUE OF PLATES

Nineteen pavilions, in the order of their telling

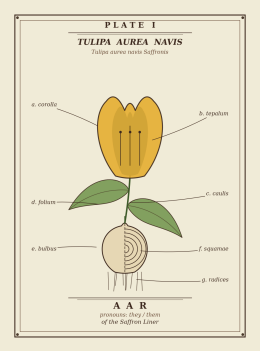


Plate I — *The Saffron Liner*

Yellow ocean-vessel, eldest of the pavilions, surrounded in her Amsterdam shipyard by tiered platforms of pink tulips and a small civic theatre of leaning cranes. Resident: *Aar* (they/them). Lifts in spring, slightly unfinished, by design.

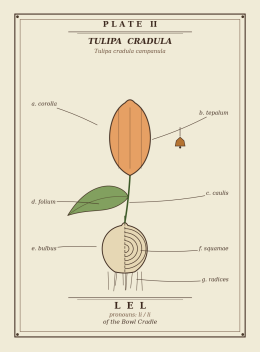


Plate II — *The Bowl Cradle*

A great wooden cup of unpainted bread-colored timber, set inside a forest of crisscrossed scaffolding, with yellow and pink tulip-fields swelling at her base. Resident: *Lel* (li/li). Lifts last, by Nellij's decree, because the cradle is the form in which the journey reverses itself.

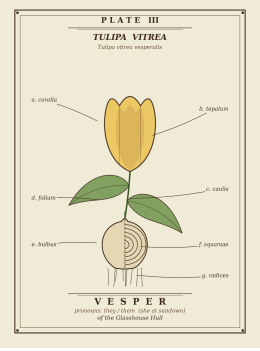


Plate III — *The Glasshouse Hull*

Yellow ship of candlelit color, raised under a vaulted glass-and-steel greenhouse on the outskirts of Amsterdam, ringed by pink tulips at every deck. Resident: *Vesper* (they/them, with one hour of *she* daily at sundown, in honor of an aunt). Lifts through a hinged glass ceiling at the appointed hour.

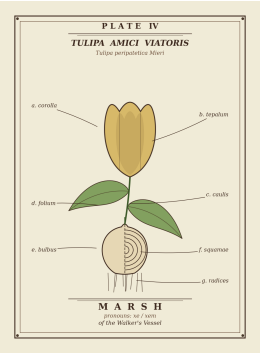


Plate IV — *The Walker's Vessel*

A modest yellow ship in a high lattice of scaffolding, surrounded by pink-and-yellow tulip-fields almost coat-high, approached daily, at dawn, by a builder named Mier in a long beige coat. Resident: *Marsh* (xe/xem). Lifts in the spring, with the pollen-saturated coat aboard.

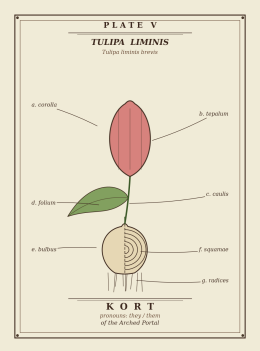


Plate V — *The Arched Portal*

Cathedral-scaled glass-and-steel hall framing a small yellow ship at its altar end, with long beds of pink tulips lining the central aisle. Resident: *Kort* (they/them). Does not lift. Will remain in Amsterdam as the formal threshold of departure for all the others.

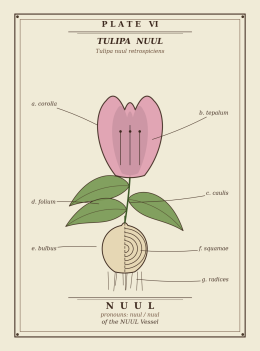


Plate VI — *The NUUL Vessel*

Pale pink ocean-liner, broader than long, with her name inscribed at the bow in dark uneven lettering, set within a tower of catwalks and yellow-domed observation pods, her crown a continuous pink-and-yellow undulating lawn. Resident: *Nuul* (nuul/nuul). Lifts in seven days, with one aft-facing window installed at the resident's request.

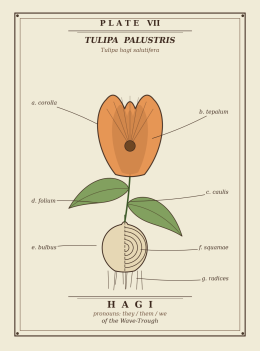


Plate VII — *The Wave-Trough*

A long undulating channel of golden wood whose upper surface bears a yellow-to-pink tulip meadow and whose underside, hollowed out, ferries small boats and their travelers free of charge across the Atlantic. Resident: *Hagi* (they/them, also *we*). Greets each passing boat through a speaking-tube; the kindness is unrecorded by design.

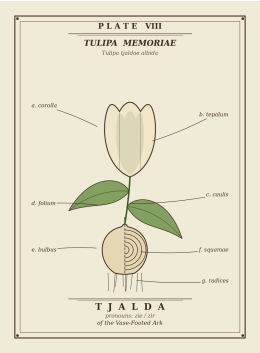


Plate VIII — *The Vase-Footed Ark*

A pink-and-yellow striped ship standing on eight irregular ceramic vases of varying glazes and colors, each vase etched on its underside with the name of a person lost at sea. Resident: *Tjalda* (zie/zir). Crosses the Atlantic standing upright on a flat barge, the eight vases bearing her weight throughout.

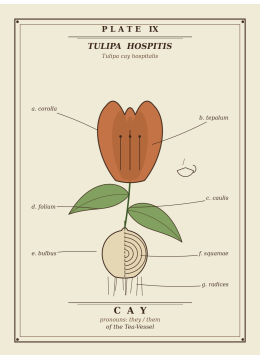


Plate IX — *The Tea-Vessel*

An enormous yellow-and-white teapot with terracotta lid and a great curved spout that arches over the harbor, surrounded at her base by a horizontal woven rug of mixed tulips. Resident: *Çay* (they/them) and forty-seven private guest-tulips behind small white curtains in her portholes. Pours a ceremonial stream of tea into the harbor on arrival.

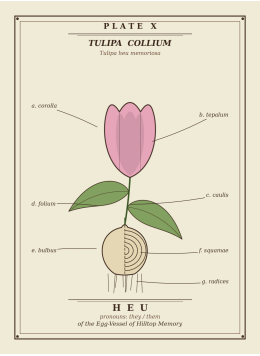


Plate X — *The Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory*

An enormous yellow ovoid set on a forest of A-frame supports, the lower hull wrapped in a photographic-scale mural of pink-blossoming Dutch hills painted by seventeen Flemish and Dutch landscapists. Resident: *Heu* (they/them). Carries the mural as a refusal of the migrant's customary entrance fee of forgetting.

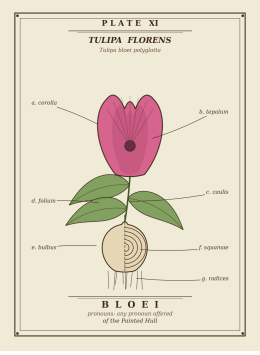


Plate XI — *The Painted Hull*

A broad white ship on yellow trestles, painted top to bottom with photographic cherry-blossom hills, surmounted by a small village of coral-red wooden pavilions arranged across her crown. Resident: *Bloei* (any pronoun). Carries a multilingual library in her belly. The painted hill is a *prophecy in reverse*.

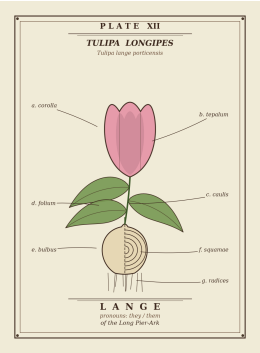


Plate XII — *The Long Pier-Ark*

A horizontal vessel-pier of pale wood, painted along her entire flank with continuous receding cherry-blossom branches, raised on yellow scaffolded supports along the Hudson and intended as a permanent covered promenade in the new harbor. Resident: *Lange* (they/them). Crosses the Atlantic in numbered segments and is reassembled in public on arrival.

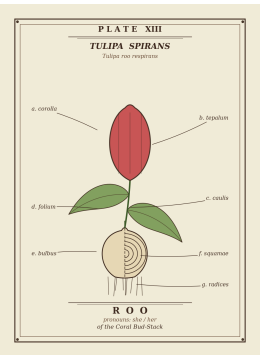


Plate XIII — *The Coral Bud-Stack*

Yellow ocean-liner whose smokestack is an enormous coral-red closed tulip-bud that vents engine-warmth slowly through its sealed petals, producing the optical effect of a vessel that breathes. Resident: *Roo* (she/her). Was the first to dock; spent one full hour breathing in unison with the harbor.

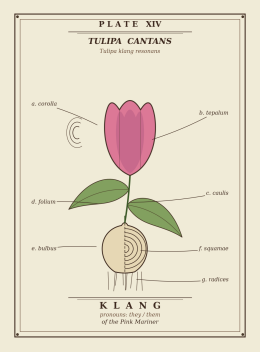


Plate XIV — *The Pink Mariner*

Long pink-hulled ship with yellow and red upper deck, scaffolding still wrapped along her midship, fringed at her rim by yellow tulips like a golden eyelash. Resident: *Klang* (they/them). Sings constantly and almost inaudibly; the city has begun to hum.

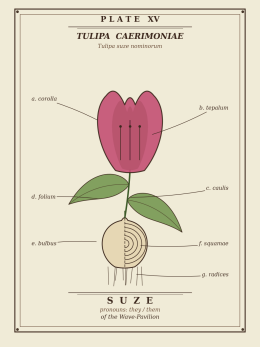


Plate XV — *The Wave-Pavilion*

A high yellow-hulled ship-shape installed permanently on a New Amsterdam plaza, its lower flank opened to reveal a vast horizontal print of a pink cherry-orchard along the inner wall. Resident: *Suze* (they/them). Custodian of the public liturgy of unread names. *Let the unread names hum.*

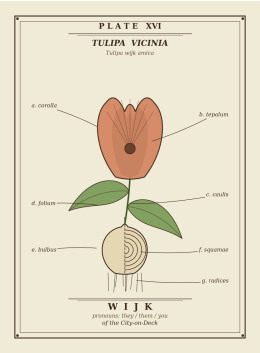


Plate XVI — *The City-on-Deck*

A long pale-pink hull crowned with a small wooden village of fifteen-or-so peach-roofed houses with real chimneys and real smoke. Resident: *Wijk* (they/them in formal contexts, *you* in casual ones). The houses were left unfinished on purpose, to be finished by the new citizens.

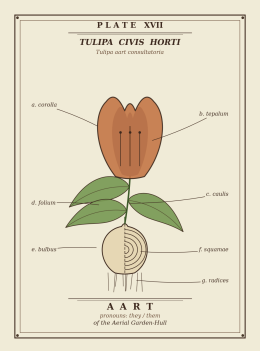


Plate XVII — *The Aerial Garden-Hull*

The largest of the pavilions, a vast horizontal terrace-garden with long curving valleys of yellow and pink, bisected by a long wooden corridor housing germination labs. Resident: *Aart* (they/them). Catalogues every bulb's preferences. Bulbs are now formally recognized as citizens of the New Amsterdam parks.

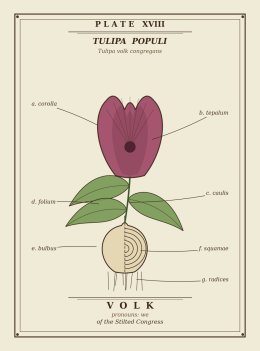


Plate XVIII — *The Stilted Congress*

A broad horizontal hull held aloft on hundreds of slender wooden stilts, the deck arranged in tiered platforms upon which several thousand small carved figures stand looking out toward the harbor. Resident: *Volk* (we). Each figure represents one historical arrival. The deck has come to be called *the little parliament*.

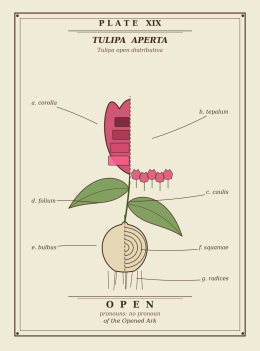


Plate XIX — *The Opened Ark*

The final pavilion. Cleaved at sea, mid-Atlantic, by Nellij and a team of carpenters; arrived in New Amsterdam with her hull already opened in a great vertical seam, the cleaved face stratified yellow-to-magenta in tulips, a river of mixed bloom spilling onto the dock and continuing up the avenue. Resident: *Open* (no pronoun). The welcome itself, already happened. *All are welcome here.*

CATALOGUE OF INSPIRATIONS

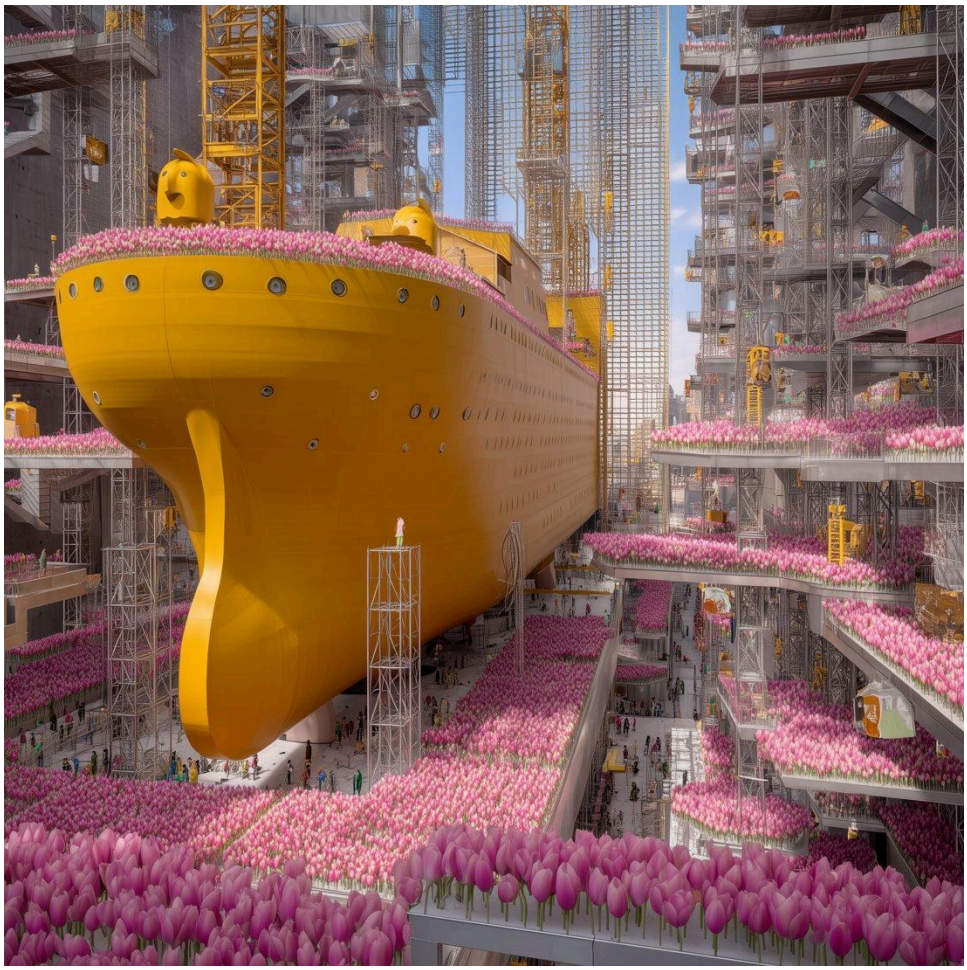
The nineteen renderings from which the pavilions were drawn

Before there were sentences there were images. The renderings catalogued here came first — nineteen visions of tulip-pavilions arriving in the new harbor — and the prose followed them, as a slower, more verbal kind of seeing. I record them here, full-page, with brief notes on what each gave to the corresponding pavilion. They are the original soil from which the book grew. I owe them everything.

~ ❦ ~

Inspiration I

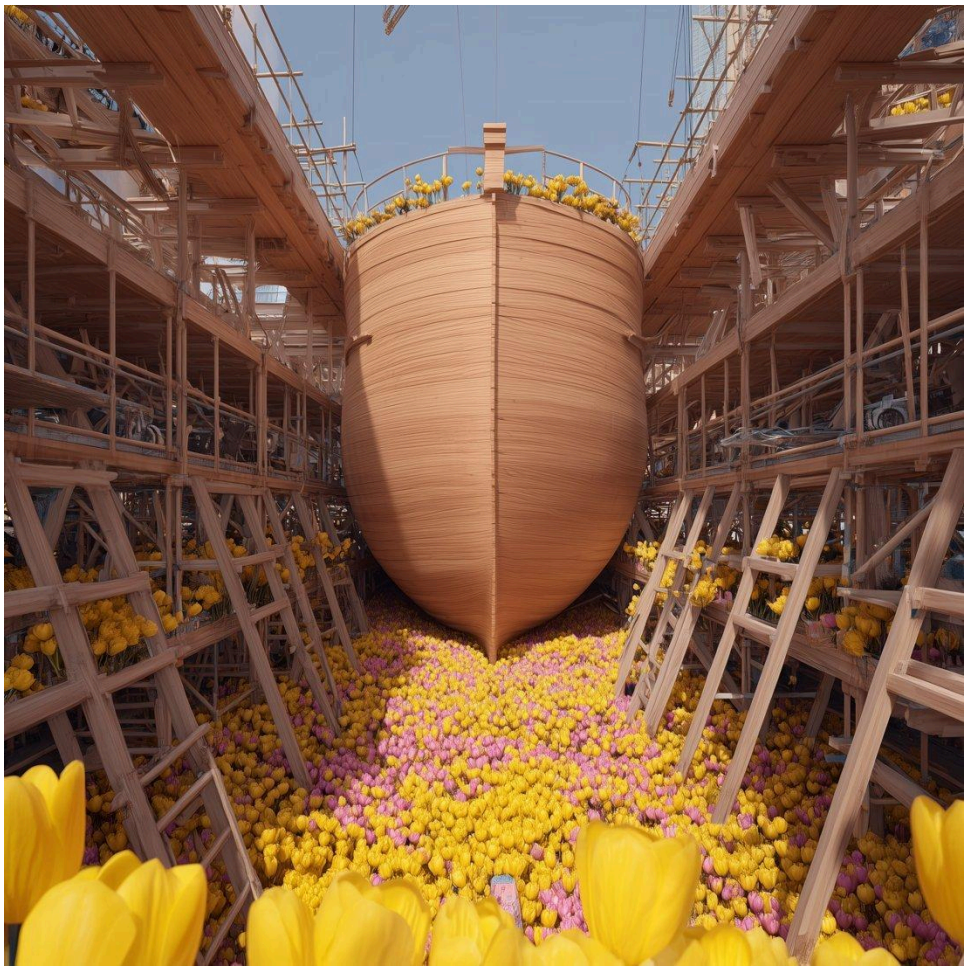
The Saffron Liner



The progenitor image. A vast yellow ocean-liner under construction in a high steel-and-bamboo shipyard, surrounded on every tier by terraces of pink tulips. The cranes lean inward like attentive aunts. This rendering set the rule of the entire book: that scaffolding would be visible, that the bloom would be public, and that a vessel arriving slightly unfinished was the most generous of arrivals. From this image came Aar, the eldest tulip-spirit, and from Aar came the courage to leave one's first soil before one had finished becoming.

Inspiration II

The Bowl Cradle



A wooden vessel shaped like a great cup, set inside a forest of crisscrossed scaffolding. Yellow and pink tulip-fields swell at the base; the hull has the color of new bread. This image gave the novella its smallest and softest character — Lel, the bulb-spirit who uses li/li, who keeps a copper bell in li hollow and writes in a ledger every time the bell rings. The cradle taught the book that a journey can begin in a form that has not yet been filled.

Inspiration III

The Glasshouse Hull

A yellow vessel raised under a great vaulted greenhouse of glass and yellow steel, ringed at every deck by pink tulips, with rows of pink tulips in the foreground softening the engineering. This rendering proposed the radical idea of building a ship indoors — of letting tenderness be the engineering condition of the new self. From this image came Vesper, the studious bulb-spirit who reads Spinoza, who keeps the hour of sundown for the aunt who taught them to read.

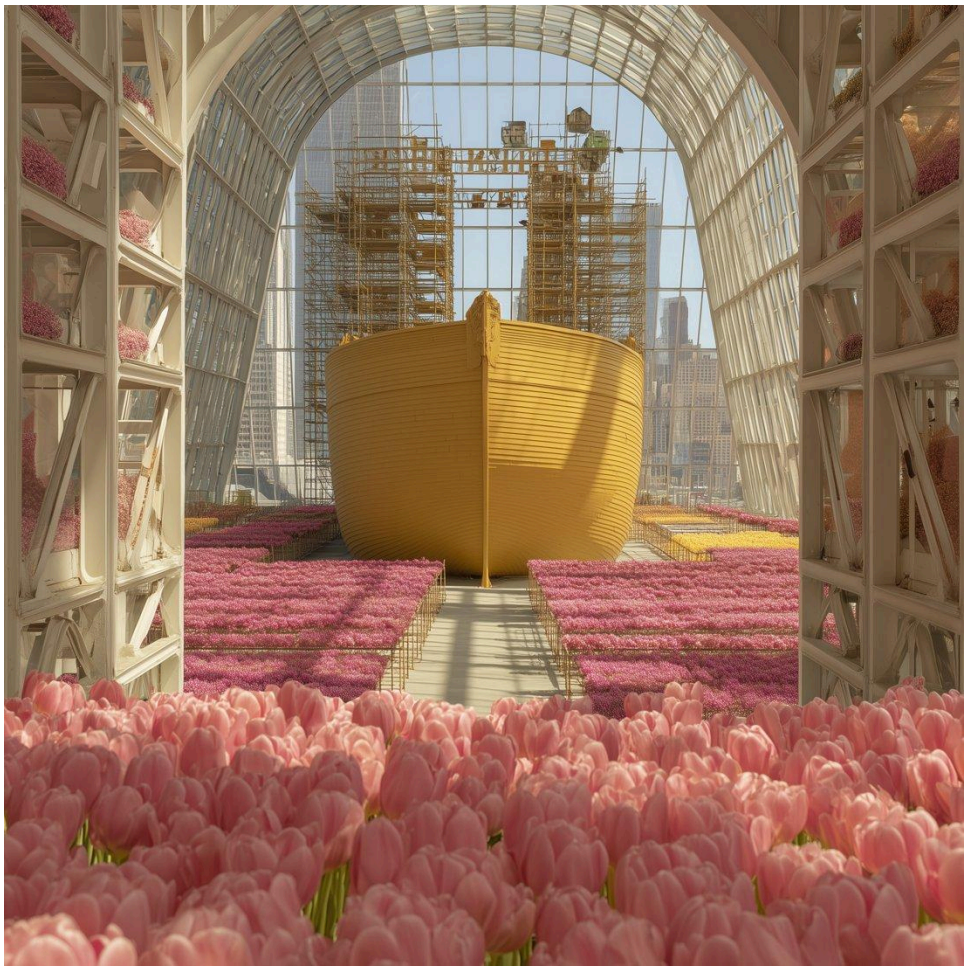
Inspiration IV

The Walker's Vessel

A figure in a long beige coat walking down a wooden plank between two fields of pink and yellow tulips, toward a yellow vessel in scaffolding. The composition is absurdly tender. This image is the ars poetica of the entire book — a person walking through a flower-sea toward a vessel they have helped to build. From it came the builder Mier (they/them) and the silent flower Marsh (xe/xem); from it came the conviction that the coat itself, pollen-saturated, is the first document of any crossing.

Inspiration V

The Arched Portal



A high cathedral-arched glass-and-steel hall framing a small yellow ship at its altar end, with long beds of pink tulips lining the central aisle. This rendering proposed something none of the others did: a vessel that would not travel. The Portal stands in Amsterdam still; through it, every other pavilion passes on its way to the harbor. From it came Kort (they/them), the tulip-spirit of the brief sentence, and the central insight that some kinds of welcome are doorways rather than destinations.

Inspiration VI

The NUUL Vessel

An immense pale-pink hull, broader than long, set within a tower of catwalks and small yellow-domed observation pods, her name inscribed at the bow in dark uneven lettering: NUUL. This image gave the book its largest and calmest character — the bulb-spirit Nuul (nuul/nuul), who answers questions slowly and carefully, who insisted on an aft-facing window so that Amsterdam would remain visible for as long as nuul wished to look. The vessel's name was untranslatable; the book accepted this as a gift.

Inspiration VII

The Wave-Trough

An aerial view of a long wave-shaped wooden trough whose upper surface bears a yellow-and-pink tulip meadow, and whose underside is hollowed to ferry small boats — the dinghies, the canoes — beneath its belly, between two banks of Manhattan skyscrapers. From this rendering came the most political pavilion in the book: Hagi (they/them, also we), whose role is to call greetings down through a speaking-tube to each small boat that passes beneath, kindly, free of charge, in a kindness that leaves no archive.

Inspiration VIII

The Vase-Footed Ark

A pink-and-yellow striped vessel resting on eight irregular ceramic vases of varying glazes — sage, oat, buttermilk, ash-blue, terracotta, pale rose, bone, and an indeterminate green-grey. From this rendering came the most memorial pavilion: Tjalda (zie/zir), whose great-grandmother was a herring-merchant, and the eight vases bear the names of those who were lost at sea. The Ark stands on her grief and is exuberant about it. The image taught the book that mourning, when properly attended, can hold up a great deal of yellow.

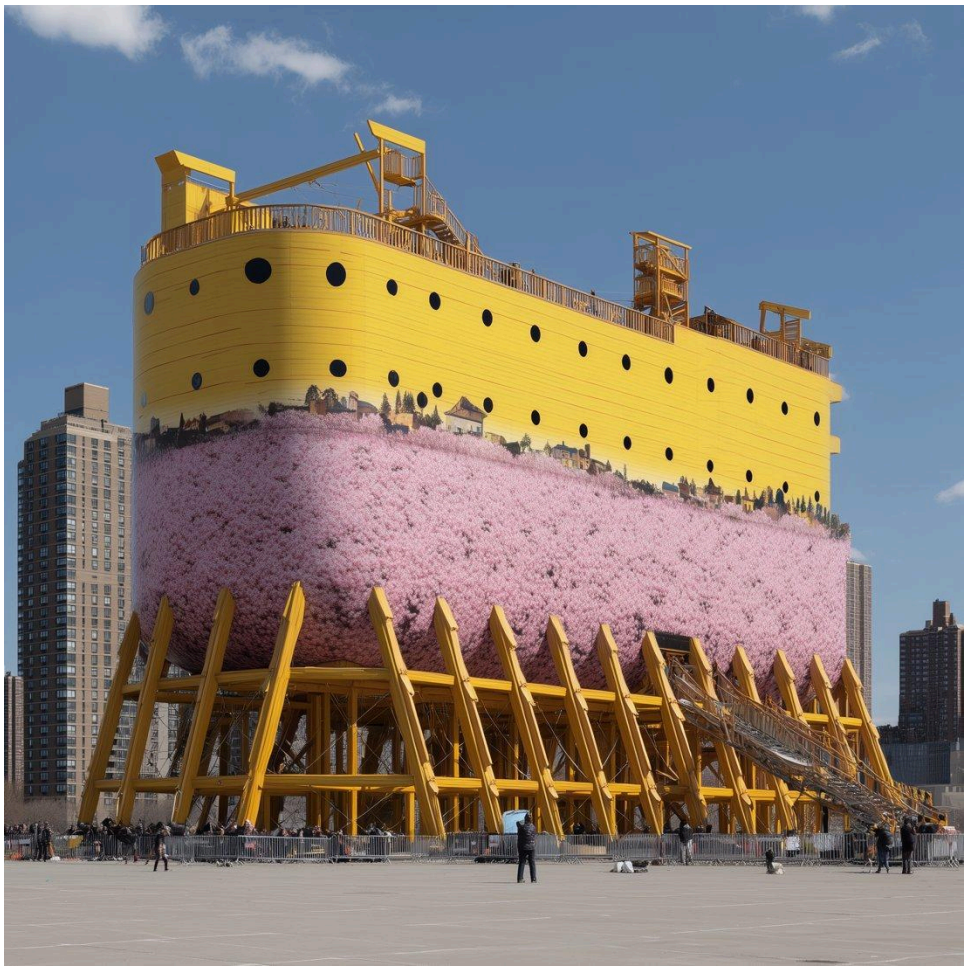
Inspiration IX

The Tea-Vessel

An enormous teapot of yellow base and white upper, with a curved spout arching outward over a vast horizontal rug of mixed tulips, the Manhattan skyline shrinking modestly behind it. From this image came the most hospitable spirit in the book: Çay (they/them), who pours a ceremonial stream of tea into the harbor on arrival, who sits forty-seven private guest-tulips behind small white curtains in the portholes. The teapot is the most legible promise a kitchen can make; the book took it as a thesis.

Inspiration X

The Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory



A great yellow ovoid set on a wooden A-frame, the lower hull wrapped in a photographic-scale mural of pink-blossoming hills and small painted villages — visible behind the New Amsterdam high-rises that flank it. From this rendering came Heu (they/them), whose painted hill is the hill they came from, and the central refusal of the migrant: Heu will not perform forgetfulness as the entrance fee. The book learned from this image that a body can carry its old country wrapped around it as testimony.

Inspiration XI

The Painted Hull

A broad yellow ship raised on yellow trestles, painted top to bottom with a great photographic cherry-blossom orchard, surmounted at her crown by a small village of coral-red wooden pavilions stacked across the deck like a high town. From this rendering came Bloei (any pronoun offered), the most extroverted of the bulb-spirits, and the formal idea of a *prophecy in reverse* — a hill depicted before it has happened, in order that the new soil may begin practicing its possibility.

Inspiration XII

The Long Pier-Ark

A horizontal vessel-pier of pale wood, painted along its entire flank with continuous receding cherry-blossom branches, raised on yellow scaffolded supports along the river. The most architectural of the renderings, and the one that most clearly suggested a permanent civic future. From it came Lange (they/them), the calm long-stem spirit, and the practice by which painted blossoms on a hull eventually rhyme with real blossoms in a real avenue, until no one in the new city remembers which came first.

Inspiration XIII

The Coral Bud-Stack

A yellow ocean-liner whose smokestack is an enormous coral-red closed tulip-bud — the bud breathes warmly through its sealed petals — with smaller golden tulip-stacks attending it, set against a softened Empire State Building. From this image came Roo (she/her), the only pavilion-spirit who chose a single pronoun and guarded it gently. From the breathing bud came the entire morning of the docking, when the harbor breathed slowly in unison with a flower for one full hour.

Inspiration XIV

The Pink Mariner

A long pink-coral hull in scaffolding, with vivid yellow tulips at the rim like a golden eyelash, set against a hazed Manhattan skyline. The image is musical without showing music. From it came Klang (they/them), the bulb-spirit who hums constantly and almost inaudibly, whose single sustained note on docking lasted eleven minutes and forty-two seconds, and whose first audible word, sung to the harbor, was *yes*.

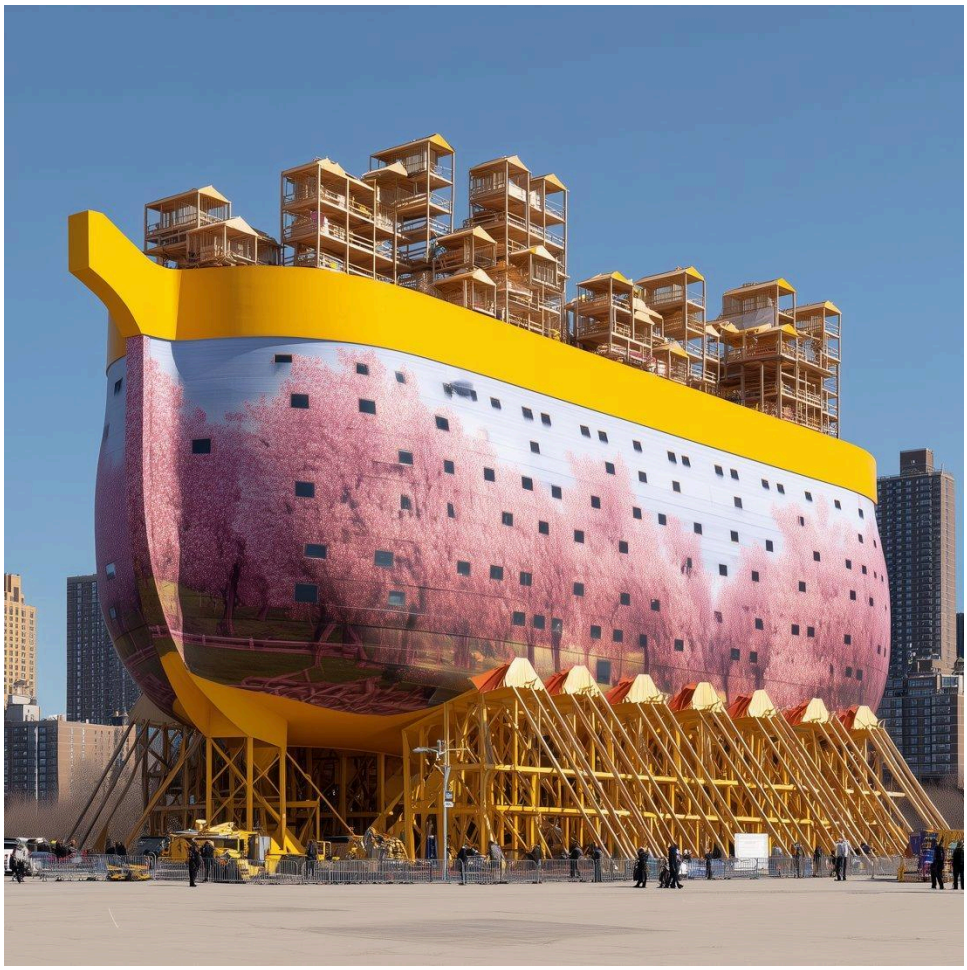
Inspiration XV

The Wave-Pavilion

A high yellow-orange building shaped like a wave caught at the moment of breaking, with a vast horizontal photographic mural of pink cherry-orchard cloud beneath, set on a stone plaza in the new city. From this rendering came Suze (they/them), keeper of the public liturgy of unread names, who reads aloud at arrival the names of those lost in every crossing. Engraved on the threshold plaque: *Let the unread names hum.*

Inspiration XVI

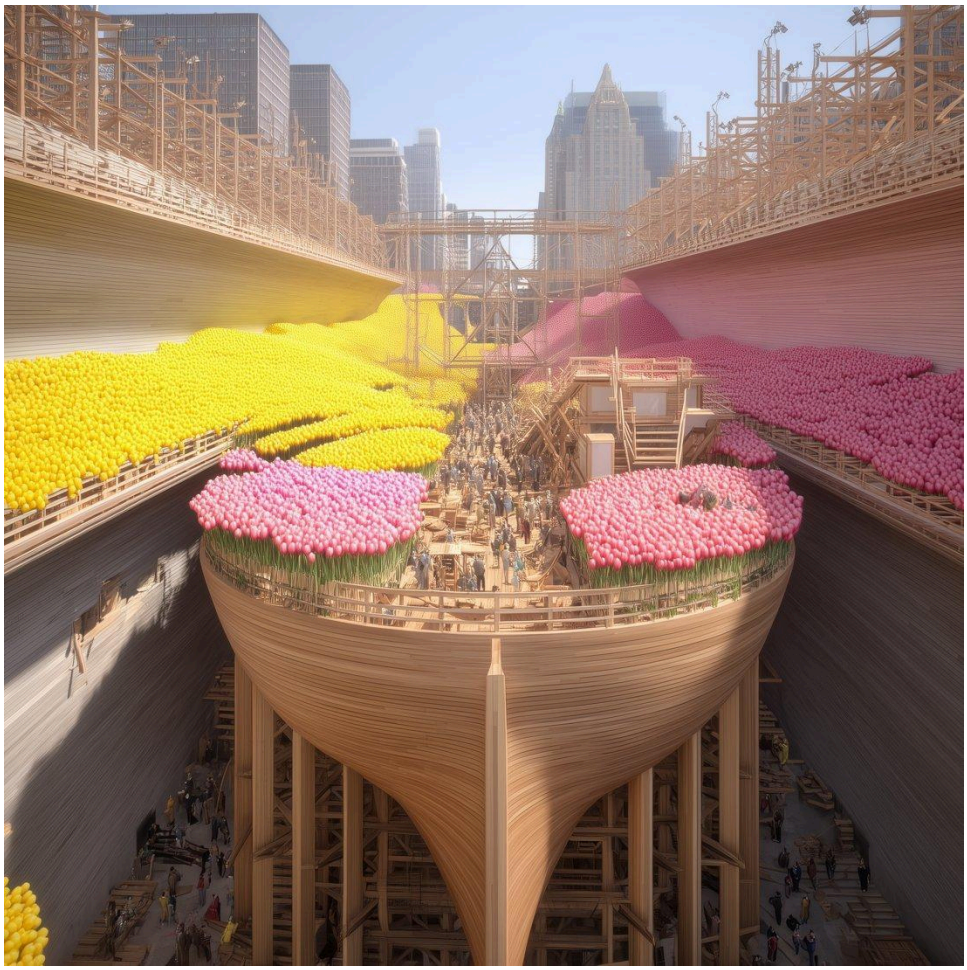
The City-on-Deck



A pale-pink hull painted with cherry-blossom orchard and crowned with a small wooden village of fifteen-or-so peach-roofed houses, real chimneys included. From this image came the most populous pavilion: Wijk (they/them in formal contexts, *you* in casual ones), the host who knew that hospitality must include unfinished work, and who left the upper houses incomplete on purpose so the new citizens might finish them themselves. The City-on-Deck is now the friendliest neighborhood in the new harbor.

Inspiration XVII

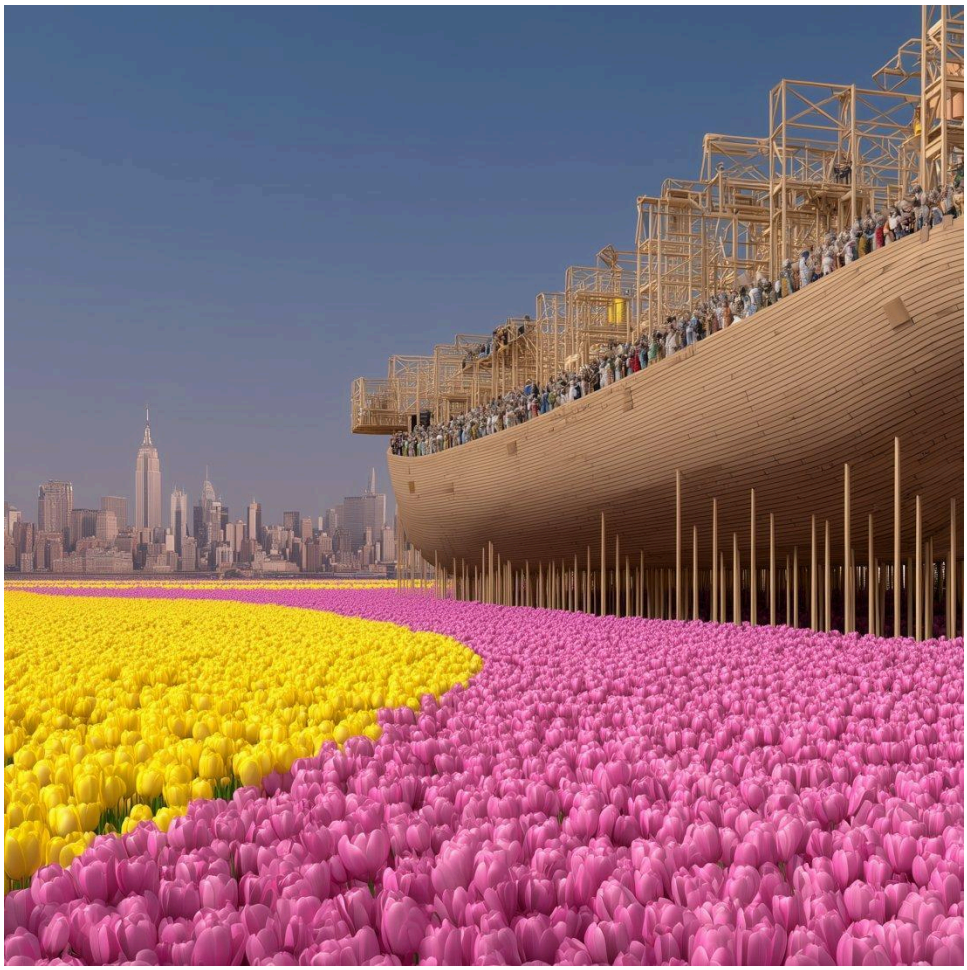
The Aerial Garden-Hull



An aerial view of a vast horizontal terrace-garden bisected by a long wooden corridor, with sweeping valleys of yellow and pink tulips on either side and the towers of the new city in the middle distance. From this rendering came Aart (they/them), the agronomist-spirit who consults the bulbs about their soil preferences, and the eventual policy under which the bulbs of New Amsterdam are formally recognized as citizens of the parks. The agricultural is also the civic; the image insisted on this.

Inspiration XVIII

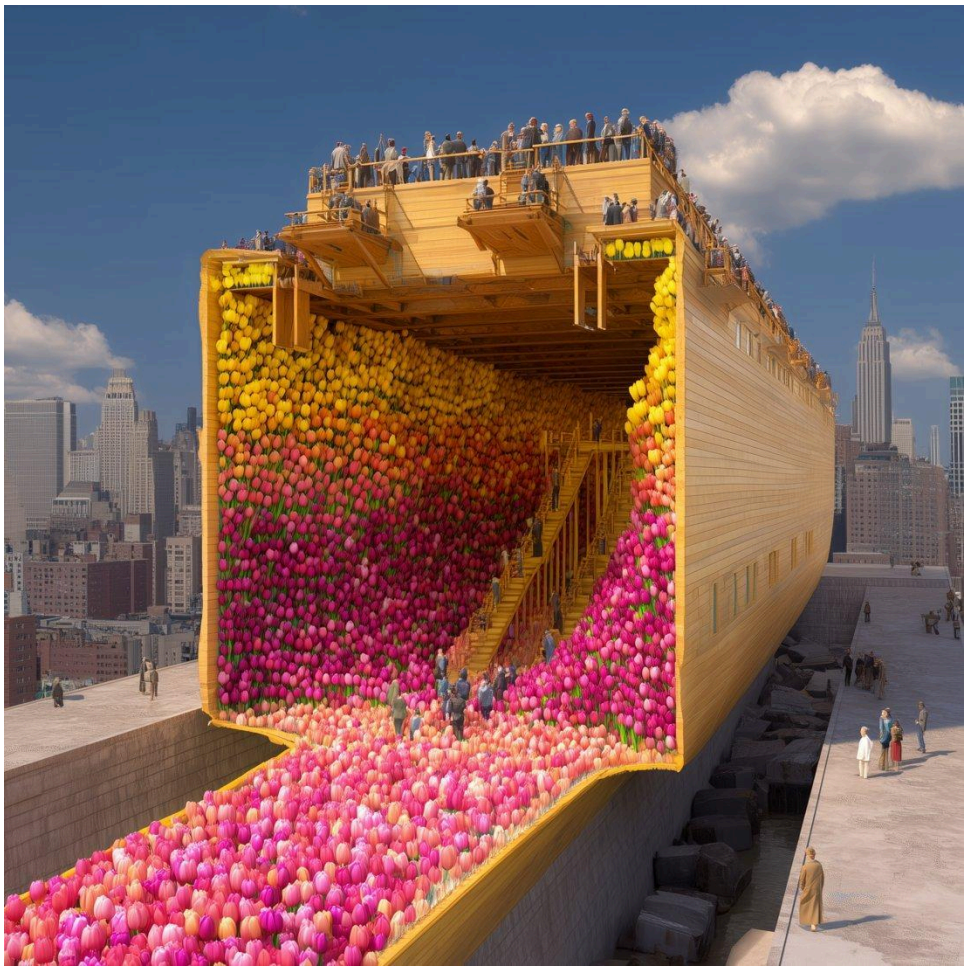
The Stilted Congress



A vast horizontal hull held aloft on hundreds of slender wooden stilts, the deck arranged in tiered platforms upon which several thousand small carved figures stand, all looking together toward the Manhattan skyline across long sweeping fields of yellow and pink tulips. From this image came Volk (we), the only spirit who speaks exclusively in the plural, and the institution of the *little parliament* — a deck on which one tulip is placed at the feet of one carved figure on each anniversary of an arrival in the harbor.

Inspiration XIX

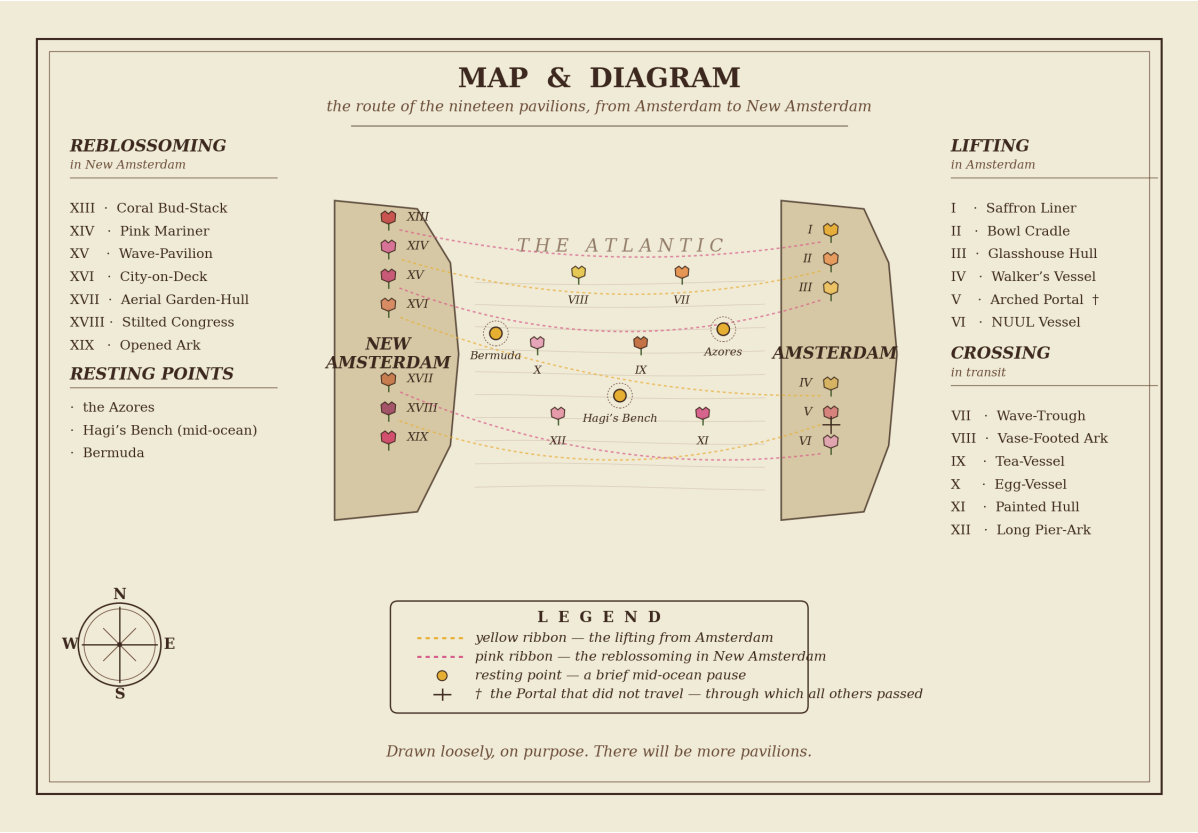
The Opened Ark



The book's culminating image. An immense yellow ark whose hull has been cleaved in a great vertical seam, the cut interior stratified yellow-to-magenta in tulips, a river of mixed bloom spilling out of the cleaved face onto a New Amsterdam pavement, with the Empire State Building visible in the distance as quiet witness. From this rendering came Open (no pronoun), the spirit who chose to arrive already given, distributed, past the moment of decision. The novella's last sentence is, in some sense, only a translation of this image: *All are welcome here.*

MAP & DIAGRAM

The route of the pavilions, from Amsterdam to New Amsterdam, with the resting points of the crossing



The journey is best read west to west, from the old harbor to the new, with the Atlantic between them as a wide blue page on which the pavilions have written their crossings in slow ink.

At the eastern margin of the page, in Amsterdam, the six Lifting pavilions are clustered along the canals of the inner city. The Saffron Liner occupies the oldest shipyard at the harbor mouth. The Bowl Cradle sits in the inner shipyard, surrounded by her crisscross scaffolding. The Glasshouse Hull rises out of her vaulted greenhouse on the outskirts. The Walker's Vessel is in the middle shipyard, approached daily by Mier's plank. The Arched Portal stands apart, in the western shipyard at the end of the avenue of beech trees. The NUUL Vessel waits, immense, near the river-mouth, with her aft-facing window already installed.

The crossing occupies the middle of the page, the wide Atlantic. The six Crossing pavilions trace, in this region, the route. The Wave-Trough moves slowly south of the main shipping lane, towed by her fleet of small boats, ferrying smaller travelers beneath her hull. The Vase-Footed Ark, lashed atop her great flat barge, follows a slightly more northerly route, her eight vases standing throughout. The Tea-Vessel takes the central lane, brewing her ceremonial tea below decks. The

Egg-Vessel of Hilltop Memory sails the southern lane, her painted hills facing the sea. The Painted Hull and the Long Pier-Ark, both carrying their forecast-blooms, take the upper lanes; the Pier-Ark is in segments, towed in numbered succession.

Three resting points are marked on the crossing portion of the map. These are the small islands at which the pavilions paused, briefly, to take on fresh water and to allow the bulbs to receive a few hours of stable ground. The first is **the Azores**, where the Tea-Vessel paused for two days and Çay was offered, by a small local potter, a teacup of unknown provenance, which Çay accepted and carried for the rest of the crossing. The second is **a small unnamed sandbar mid-ocean**, where the Wave-Trough paused for a single morning while the small boats below were resupplied; the sandbar, on certain Dutch maritime maps, is now marked simply as *Hagi's Bench*. The third is **Bermuda**, where the Vase-Footed Ark and the Painted Hull both paused, on consecutive days, and where Tjalda and Bloei spoke briefly together — for the only time in the journey, by chance, as their barges happened to share a quay — about the difference between memory and forecast.

At the western margin of the page, in New Amsterdam, the seven Reblossoming pavilions are arrayed along the harbor and the lower avenues. The Coral Bud-Stack docks at the small ceremonial quay near the southern tip of the island. The Pink Mariner berths just to the north, where the humming has begun to spread up the avenues. The Wave-Pavilion stands on her stone plaza set back slightly from the water, near the foot of the older neighborhoods. The City-on-Deck moors at her permanent berth a little further north, her small village of houses now occupied. The Aerial Garden-Hull, the largest, stretches along the harbor's western flank with her long wooden corridor and her germination labs; her bulbs are already being distributed to the public parks. The Stilted Congress occupies the broad waterfront promenade where the tiered figures look out together. The Opened Ark, finally, sits in the very heart of the harbor, cleaved, spilling, the river of bloom stretching from her cleaved face up the central avenue and into the city's parks beyond.

The Arched Portal is shown, as a small cross-symbol, at the eastern margin only. It does not appear on the western side. It is the only one of the nineteen that remains in Amsterdam.

A dotted line, marked in the legend as *the line of welcome*, runs from each of the six Lifting pavilions, across the Atlantic, through the resting points, to its corresponding Reblossoming pavilion on the western side. The lines do not cross. They do not converge. They do not require one another. They each travel, in their own time, between the two harbors, and they are meant — when read together on the page — to look like a small loose hand of long pink-and-yellow ribbons, lying across the Atlantic, connecting the two cities the way a long ribbon connects two ends of a wrapped gift.

The map's legend is brief. It reads:

Yellow line: lifting. Pink line: reblossoming. Blue field: the willingness. Dotted ribbon: the line of welcome. Single cross at eastern margin: the Portal that did not travel, and through which all others passed.

The map is intended to be folded out from the back of the notebook, the way the old atlases used to fold their world-maps out from behind their final pages. It is intended to be larger than the book that contains it. It is intended to suggest, by being slightly oversized, that the journey it depicts has not yet been fully concluded — that the map will, in subsequent editions, require additional ribbons.

There will be more pavilions. The map has been drawn loosely on purpose.

— *END OF NOTEBOOK*

THE INFLATED ATLAS OF MANHATTAN

A small private inventory of soft companions in the neighbourhood.

BY

SURJAN

with a Foreword by

B. M. CALHOUN

New York

late autumn

In our paradise there are no incidents and no accidents. — J. L. Borges, El otro, el mismo (paraphrased and possibly imagined)

Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let the pain make you hate. — Iain Thomas (or someone like Iain Thomas; the attribution, like much else in this volume, is provisional)

Mendigamente lo amo, y mendigamente, ze me ama. — A line found inscribed on the southern flank of OREN, attributed by zir to a poem ze had heard in passing and had been unable, since, to locate.

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Apocrypha

Foreword

It is the privilege of every editor of this kind of book to write a foreword that gestures toward something the editor will then immediately undermine. The custom is well established, and I shall not attempt to escape it. The book in your hands is a Borgesian catalogue of inflatable persons. The catalogue was written by a poet who has asked to be addressed in this volume only by the name Surjan, and who has, throughout the writing, declined to confirm whether ze considers the persons in question to be persons in the conventional sense, sculptures in the conventional sense, hallucinations in the conventional sense, or — and this is the option I think ze most gently prefers — phenomena that exceed the available conventional senses, and whose proper category may not yet have been developed by the language we have on hand.

I was given the manuscript of this book by Surjan in the autumn, in a small café on Avenue B, over a tea I was unable to identify. The manuscript was bound in a soft pink folder. The folder bore a sticker, of the kind small children apply to refrigerators, in the shape of a yellow bird. The bird, ze later confirmed, was a portrait of a vessel I would meet in chapter XIV. I did not, at that point, know that the vessels existed. I knew only that I had been given a manuscript, and that the manuscript was charming, and that the writer was — and remains — one of the most precise observers of feeling I have had the pleasure to read.

What I did, after our meeting, was an entirely conventional editor's task: I made an inquiry. I went to the locations described in the manuscript. I expected, I shall admit, to find no vessels. I expected, instead, to find empty lots, parking structures, ordinary buildings — and to learn that Surjan had written a book about persons ze had, in zir own gentle way, dreamed up. I was prepared to publish the dreaming. The dreaming, I felt, was sufficient. The book, even as a dreaming, was a contribution to American letters.

I shall not press the point that the locations Surjan describes do, as it happens, contain large pastel-coloured inflated objects. I shall not press the point because I do not, even now, know what to make of the discovery. The objects are there. I have photographed them; the photographs are on my desk; some of them are reproduced in this book. The objects are inscribed, in places, in a hand I cannot read but which Surjan can. The objects appear, by all the evidence I have been able to gather, to be exactly what Surjan describes: a population of soft persons, grounded across Manhattan, in conversation with the city and with one another and (insofar as Surjan's account is to be trusted, which it is) with whoever sits near them long enough to be addressed.

I have decided not to investigate the matter further. The investigation, I have come to believe, would not improve the book. The book is the book. The vessels are the vessels. The reader, opening this volume, is invited to enter the same condition I myself entered, when I went to the lots in the autumn: a condition in which one is not entirely certain whether one is reading reportage or fiction, and in which the uncertainty is, on closer inspection, the most accurate response to the material.

A note on the author's pronouns and on the pronouns of the vessels. Surjan has asked, throughout, to be addressed as ze and zir. The vessels have, by Surjan's careful reading of the inscriptions on their flanks, also asked to be addressed as ze and zir. I have, accordingly, used these pronouns throughout. I should note that this is not, in my judgment, a stylistic flourish. It is the pronoun the writers have chosen for themselves; the writers in question include Surjan, the vessels, and (in some passages I have permitted to stand) the wind, the river, and one of the older buildings on Hudson Street, who has asked, through Surjan, to be referred to in zir

own correct register. I have honoured all of these requests. The reader who finds zirself slowed by the unfamiliar pronoun is invited to slow zirself further, on the grounds that slowness, in the reading of this book, is not an obstacle but a feature.

A note on the structure of the book. The volume is organized as a catalogue of twenty-one vessels. Each chapter treats one vessel. Each chapter contains: a brief description of the vessel; an account of zir grounding; a discussion of zir characteristic joy; a sample of zir inscriptions; one or more footnotes, in the manner Surjan prefers; and an inline reproduction of one of the photographs Surjan has supplied. The chapters can be read in any order. The chapters can also be read all together, in their given sequence; the sequence is, by Surjan's account, a courtesy to those readers who prefer order, and is not in any other sense privileged. The vessels themselves, ze has confirmed, are in a round; the round has no first member.

Following the chapters, the volume contains: a Catalogue of Plates, listing each of the twenty-one images with brief technical descriptions; two maps of Manhattan, one drawn in the pen-and-ink manner by Surjan zirself, the other a schematic diagram of the Tabula Inflatorum (a diagram which, on first inspection, appears to be alchemical in its conventions, and which Surjan has, on direct questioning, confirmed is alchemical in spirit if not in lineage); an Afterword, titled "On Being Tethered"; and a section of Acknowledgements and Apocrypha, in which the author lists, in ze characteristically generous manner, the various persons and small institutions to whom ze is grateful, alongside a list of claims about the project that Surjan declines to verify but also declines to retract.

I have been a publisher of small books for some decades now. I have published a number of writers I am proud of, and a number I am — let us be honest — somewhat less proud of, although none of them embarrassing. I have not, in all those decades, published a book quite like this one. I am proud of this book in a way that does not feel comparable to my pride in the other books. The book has, in some way I cannot adequately specify, made me a slightly different kind of editor: more attentive, more patient, somewhat slower in my readings of new manuscripts, and considerably more willing to believe that the writers who come to me may be observing things I have not, until now, learned to see.

I commend the book to you. I do not commend it to be read quickly. I commend it to be read, perhaps, one chapter per evening; or, if you have the temperament for such things, one chapter per visit to one of zir vessels (a number of readers in early test copies have made such pilgrimages, and have written to me to report on their experiences; I shall include a small selection of such reports in a future edition, with the writers' permission; for now I shall say only that the pilgrimages, by all available evidence, do something to those who undertake them, and the something is, by all available evidence, mostly good). The book is, in its way, an instrument. The instrument is best used slowly. The instrument, used slowly, has — in my own case, at considerable cost to the schedule of my publishing house — turned out to be capable of small permanent improvements to the way I move through the city, the way I sit in my own apartment, and the way I listen to the people I love.

I shall stop here. I have, in keeping with the foreword's traditional brief, gestured toward something I will now not undermine after all. The book speaks for itself, and for its twenty-one vessels, and (in the most surprising passages) for some of the rest of us also.

— B. M. Calhoun, editor

New York, late autumn

Introduction

by Surjan

I had not intended to write a book. I had intended only to keep notes for myself, on a project I was, at the time, calling "a small private inventory of soft companions in the neighbourhood." The notes accumulated. The notes, after some months, began to develop chapters of their own — chapters I had not consciously assigned to them, but which the notes had taken upon themselves, in the manner of any sufficiently observed material. By the time I noticed that the notes had become a book, the book was, in some practical sense, three-quarters written, and was — by the same practical measure — owed to its subjects. I owe this book to the twenty-one vessels described herein. They have been more patient with my drafts than I deserved. They have, in places, corrected my drafts. The corrections appear in the text where Surjan was wrong, in the small footnotes; I have left the corrections in.

A note on the genre. This is a Borgesian book in the sense that it borrows from a particular Borges — from El libro de los seres imaginarios, from Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, from the great encyclopedic Borges of the catalogue. I have not borrowed from the labyrinth Borges, because labyrinths exhaust me, and because the project of this book is not to confound but to welcome. I have not borrowed from the mirror Borges, although there are a few passages — in the chapter on Vesper, in particular — where the mirror Borges appears, briefly, to whisper. I have not borrowed from the crime Borges, because there are no crimes in this book. The book is, by design, a friendly book. The friendliness, however, is, I hope, of a kind that does not preclude seriousness. I am attempting to describe creatures whose existence is, in some philosophical sense, in question; the question, in my view, deserves to be approached cheerfully.

A note on what the vessels are. I have been asked, repeatedly, what the vessels are. The honest answer is that I do not know in any final sense, and that the not-knowing is part of the project. The vessels are, in some sense, large pastel-coloured inflated objects scattered across Manhattan. They are also, in another sense, persons — they have names, they have inscriptions in their own hands, they reply (in writing) to questions, they have established relationships with their neighbourhoods. They are also, in a third sense, fictions, in the precise sense that I have written about them and you, reader, are reading the writing. The three senses do not, on close inspection, compete with one another. Each is true. Each is partial. The full truth is, I suspect, in all three at once, and possibly in further senses I have not yet identified.

I have come to believe that the question "what are they" is the wrong question. The right question is "what are they doing here." To this question, I have an answer: they are demonstrating, at scale, the various forms that joy can take when joy is allowed to be specific. Each of the twenty-one has a particular, precisely located, characteristic joy: the joy of the misplaced door, the joy of the wrong direction, the joy of the chimney that does not smoke, and so on. None of these joys is generic. Each of these joys is small, situated, and complete. The collection of the twenty-one is, in this sense, an encyclopaedia of small joys. I have not exhausted the encyclopaedia. There are, almost certainly, more vessels than the twenty-one I have described; there are, almost certainly, more joys than the twenty-one I have catalogued; the catalogue is, on Borges's model, partial by design.

A note on the inscriptions. The vessels write. They write on themselves. They write in inks I have, in places, identified (most often a soft pink graphite that comes from a particular kind of stone they have identified for me but have asked me not to publish the location of) and in places not identified at all. They write in several hands. Most of the writing is in the vessel's own first-person voice; some of it is, I suspect, in voices the vessel has overheard and has copied out, faithfully, as a kind of preservation; some of it is in voices I cannot place. The writing is, in places, clear; in places opaque; in places erased and rewritten. I have transcribed only what I have been able to transcribe. I have not, except in occasional clearly marked passages, attempted to interpret. The interpretation, I hope, is the reader's privilege.

A note on the photographs. I have included one photograph per chapter. The photographs were taken by me, at the lot in question, on visits arranged by appointment with the vessel zirself. (Yes: the appointments were arranged. Each vessel was given the option to refuse the photograph; none did. Several requested specific times of day; I have honoured the requests where I could.) The photographs are, in my opinion, accurate; but the vessels themselves have, in places, mildly disputed the photographs, on the grounds that no single moment can adequately represent a creature whose temperament shifts across the day. I have left the photographs in, on the understanding that they are reductive, but useful; I have asked each vessel for permission to publish the photograph, and each has granted it.

A note on the language. I have written this book in English. I am not certain that English is the best language for the book; the vessels themselves write, in their inscriptions, in a number of languages, and not all of the languages are languages I can read. (I read English, French, Spanish, and a small amount of Hindi; the other languages on the vessels' flanks remain mysterious to me.) I have translated the inscriptions into English where I could. I have, in places, marked passages as "my translation" or "my rough sense of"; the reader is invited to consider these the cataloguer's best effort, and to be patient with their imperfections. Surjan's English is, I am told, slightly idiosyncratic — the legacy of a peripatetic education across three continents — and I have not attempted to smooth it out. The smoothing would, I suspect, lose something that the slight idiosyncrasy preserves.

A note on the pronoun. I use ze and zir throughout. The vessels have asked for these pronouns. I, also, prefer them; I have for some years preferred them; I had, at the start of this project, expected that the vessels would use a variety of pronouns, and that the variety would be a small celebration. They have, instead, all chosen the same pronoun. I asked the first vessel, Pilsen, why this might be. Pilsen replied, in writing: WE ARE ZE BECAUSE WE ARE NOT ALONE IN BEING ZE. THE OTHERS WHO USE ZE ARE OUR COMPANY. THE COMPANY IS LARGE, ALTHOUGH MUCH OF IT IS HUMAN AND IS NOT VISIBLY MARKED AS ZE TO THE PASSING OBSERVER. WE ARE PROUD TO USE THE PRONOUN ON THEIR BEHALF. WE ARE PROUD TO USE THE PRONOUN ON OUR OWN BEHALF. THE PRONOUNS ARE, WE FIND, A SMALL ARCHITECTURAL FEATURE OF THE LANGUAGE WHICH PERMITS A KIND OF DWELLING THAT THE OTHER PRONOUNS, IN OUR EXPERIENCE, DO NOT PERMIT. — P. I have honoured the request. I have, also, found my own dwelling in the language slightly improved by it.

A note on the order of chapters. I have ordered the chapters, as I shall acknowledge in the chapter on Zara, by an arbitrary courtesy. The vessels are in a round; one could read them in any order. I have, however, made a small effort to provide a sequence which begins with one of the most accessible vessels (Pilsen, who has misplaced zir door) and ends with one of the most synthesizing (Zara, of the row of small moods); the middle is arranged so that vessels with related joys are not always adjacent, and so that no two consecutive

chapters share too many features. The reader who finds the sequence unhelpful is welcome to read the chapters in alphabetical order, in chronological order of my own visits, in the reverse of either, in random order, in the order of the colours of the visible spectrum (insofar as the vessels' colours match the spectrum, which they only sometimes do), or in any other order ze prefers. I have no preferences in this matter. The vessels, ze tell me, also have no preferences. The order is your business; the chapters are mine.

A note, at last, on the personal. I am writing this introduction in a small apartment above a laundromat on the Lower East Side. I have lived here for eleven years. I had not intended, when I moved in, to live here for eleven years; I had intended a much shorter stay, of the kind common to people in their late twenties in this city. The eleven years happened, in their way, on their own; I attended to other things; the years, attending to me, accumulated. In the last two of those years — since the vessels began to appear in the lots, and since I began to walk, with my notebook, between them — I have come to feel that the eleven years are not, as I had sometimes worried, a sign that I had failed to move. The eleven years are, instead, a sign that I had stayed. The staying is, by Canary's argument (Plate XIV), a project. I am, in keeping with Canary's instruction, taking the project seriously now.

I commend the book to you. I commend the vessels to you, when you are next walking through the city; they are not difficult to find, although they are easier to find when one is not actively looking. I commend the joy of the encyclopedic catalogue to you, on the model of Borges, who would, I think, approve of the project insofar as it is a project of friendly attention. I commend you, gentle reader, to your own version of the inflated condition; to the slow soft accumulation of small joys, each one specific, each one situated, each one tethered to its place in the city of your own life.

— *Surjan*

Lower East Side, this autumn

A Note on the Inscriptions

It seems necessary, before the chapters proper, to offer a brief taxonomy of the inscriptions. The vessels write a great deal. Their inscriptions cover their flanks, their crowns, their lower bellies; in some cases the inscriptions cover panels of inscriptions, with the older inscriptions visible faintly beneath the newer ones, in the manner of a palimpsest that has been unhurriedly amended over many years.

The inscriptions are not all of one kind. Over the course of the project I have come to distinguish seven categories, each with its own characteristic concerns, its own preferred locations on the vessel's body, and its own characteristic hands. The categories are not exclusive; an inscription may belong to several at once; the categories are, like all categories, a courtesy to those who require structure. I offer them here for that reader.

I. THE TAXONOMIC. — The vessel's account of zirself, in the conventions of natural history. Dimensions, colourings, distinguishing features, neighbours, season of arrival. These inscriptions are most often found at the upper register, in a careful hand, and serve, ze tell me, as a kind of business card for visitors who require one. Pilsen's taxonomic inscription is unusually brief ("PILSEN, of pink and yellow, in the shaft"); Armory's is unusually elaborate (covering most of zir port flank, and extending into territory ze admits is more autobiographical than taxonomic).

II. THE EPISTOLARY. — Letters, addressed to specific persons or to the wind, or to other vessels, or to objects of various kinds. These inscriptions are most often found at the rear, in a slightly looser hand, and tend to be longer than the taxonomic. Several of the vessels maintain ongoing correspondence: Mezzo writes weekly to Apricot; Honeycomb writes occasionally to Pier; Atlas and Vesper exchange notes about light. The correspondence is not, on close inspection, in conventional letters; the correspondence is, instead, written on the vessels' flanks, where the addressee can see it from across the city if the addressee chooses to look. I have asked whether this is not inconvenient. The vessels have, in several cases, replied: THE INCONVENIENCE IS THE POINT. WE WRITE TO ONE ANOTHER SLOWLY, IN THE FORM OF PUBLIC INSCRIPTIONS, BECAUSE THE SLOWNESS PRESERVES SOMETHING WE WOULD OTHERWISE LOSE; THE PRIVACY OF A SEALED LETTER IS NOT WHAT WE ARE AFTER. PLEASE DO NOT WORRY ABOUT THE EFFICIENCY. — A.

III. THE APOCRYPHA. — Claims about the past which the past, fairly examined, does not seem to support. These inscriptions are unevenly distributed; some vessels have many (Armory most of all); some have none (Buoy is entirely apocrypha-free, by design). The apocrypha are not lies; the vessels who write them are not, by my reading, attempting to deceive; the apocrypha are, instead, a category of writing which the vessels consider fully legitimate and which I have come to consider — perhaps controversially — as approximately as true as the more verifiable inscriptions. The apocrypha record what might have been; what was almost; what would have been, given a slightly different turn of events; what is, in some parallel grammar, currently the case. I have transcribed the apocrypha faithfully. The reader is invited to assess them as ze sees fit.

IV. THE PRACTICAL. — Notes on weather, on the small daily activities of the vessel's neighbours, on the schedule of the bakery on the corner, on the moods of the parking attendant. These inscriptions are most common on Float and Honeycomb, who are the most attentive observers of small daily fact, and rarest on Nimbus, who has only one surface and uses it economically. The practical inscriptions are charming and

useful in roughly equal measure. I have been able, on more than one occasion, to determine the bakery's hours from a vessel's inscription where the bakery's own posted hours had become unreliable.

V. THE METAPHYSICAL. — Speculations about being, time, doors, surfaces, names, the nature of inflation. These inscriptions are densest on Ortho (zir entire port flank is a small philosophical treatise, in a hand which I have come to suspect is not entirely Ortho's own but which Ortho has invited the writer of) and on Nimbus (whose metaphysical inscriptions are, alas, in the unreadable script described in the chapter on zir, although I have hazarded English versions of several). The metaphysical inscriptions can be challenging on first reading; I recommend, on the model of all good metaphysical writing, returning to them on a Tuesday.

VI. THE LIST. — The vessels are great list-makers. Pilsen's list of items currently inside zir; Saffron's list of options not taken; Buoy's list of small things which are, in fact, the right size; Zara's lists of moods running in parallel. The lists are not, in my reading, exhaustive; the lists are illustrative; the lists invite the reader to make zir own. I have, on several flanks, found small lists begun by the vessel and continued, in different hands, by visitors over time. The visitor-extended lists are particularly precious to me. I have transcribed several of them in the chapters that follow, with the visitors' implicit consent (the consent given by the act of writing on the vessel's flank, which the vessel has not erased).

VII. THE INVITATION. — Direct address to the reader, in which the inscription steps out of its context and speaks to whoever is presently reading. These are the rarest of the inscriptions, and also the most striking. They appear on the flanks of every vessel except Calder, who, being a committee, prefers to address the reader through the deliberations of zir three pink mouths rather than directly. The invitations are, by my reading, the most personally consequential of the inscriptions. They are also, by the vessels' design, easily missed. I have flagged several of them in the chapters that follow. I cannot guarantee I have flagged all of them. I commend the reader to scan, on each chapter's photograph, for the small bright passages which seem to be looking back.

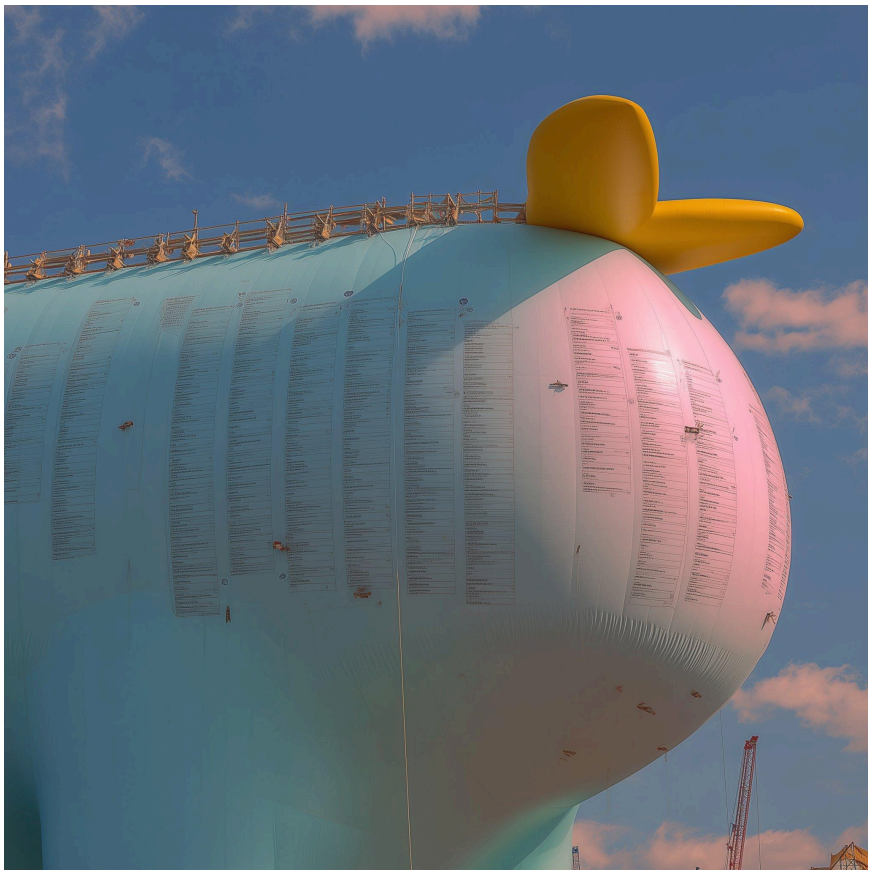
I close this note with one further observation. The inscriptions, taken together, constitute a body of writing significantly larger than this book. I have transcribed only a small fraction of what is on the vessels' flanks. The rest awaits, on the flanks themselves, available to the patient visitor. The reader who finds zirself moved by what is in these chapters is encouraged to visit the vessels — the locations are described in each chapter and on the maps in the back of this volume — and to read further, on the flanks, what I have not had room to include. The visiting is, in my own experience, the more rewarding form of reading. The book is a guide. The guide is not the country. The country is — I am pleased to report — open, free of charge, and very nearly always on duty.

I

PILSEN

who has misplaced their door

PILSEN is the first of the twenty-one because Pilsen is the first I met, and because Pilsen, by zir own admission, is the first to have arrived — although ze cannot now remember from where, and is suspicious of anyone who claims to. Ze is rose-pink at the haunch and buttercream-yellow at the brow, with a single faintly mauve aperture on zir left flank which, depending on the hour, is either a porthole, a mouth, or nothing at all.



PILSEN, in the air-shaft (Plate I).

Ze is grounded, at the time of this writing, in the air-shaft between a brownstone (No. 218) and a parking structure (No. 216) on a side-street I have promised not to name.[1] The shaft is exactly Pilsen's width, which is to say: not exactly Pilsen's width — ze is squeezed at the top and overflows, slightly, at the bottom, like a slow pink tongue testing the rim of a cup. Tenants in 218 report that the wall of their bedroom has, since Pilsen's arrival, become very slightly warm to the touch, and that they sleep better, and that they dream more often of relatives they had forgotten they liked. Tenants in 216 report that their parked cars now smell, faintly, of marzipan. The parking attendant has begun, against all his instincts, to whistle.

¹ The promise was extracted under conditions I am still adjudicating: ze offered me a candy from somewhere inside zir interior, which I ate before I had thought through the implications. The candy was excellent. The promise, in retrospect, is non-negotiable. It has subsequently been pointed out to me that the candy may not have come from zir interior at all — Pilsen has no provable interior — and that I therefore made my promise on the basis of a confection of dubious provenance. I do not consider this a defect. The candy was real. The promise is real. The street name, in fairness to all, remains undisclosed.

Pilsen's most striking feature, and the source of zir epithet, is zir door. That is to say: Pilsen has misplaced it. There is a door. Everyone agrees there is a door. The door is even, in places, drawn upon zir skin — a rectangular outline, or a faintly suggested arch, or in one case a hinge unaccompanied by anything to hinge upon. The door is mentioned in Pilsen's own inscriptions; ze cites it, ze invokes it, ze records its dimensions. ("The door," Pilsen has written upon zir own thigh, "is seven feet by three, opens inward, and was last seen on a Wednesday.") But the door itself is nowhere. It is not on the front. It is not on the back. It is not, despite repeated checks, underneath. The door has, in some sense available to Pilsen but not to me, gone for a walk.

This is not, Pilsen wishes me to emphasize, a problem. Pilsen does not wish to be entered. Pilsen wishes to be visited, which is a different verb. Visitors stand outside zir flank and tell zir things, and ze listens, and occasionally a small slip of paper emerges from one of zir seams and floats to the ground; the slip will say something like THANK YOU or HAVE YOU TRIED EATING A PEACH or, in one celebrated case, THE DOOR IS FINE; THE DOOR IS HAVING A LOVELY TIME. The slips are kept, by certain neighbours, in a glass jar on a windowsill. The jar is replenished irregularly. The jar has never, in living memory, been empty.

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A sample of Pilsen's inscriptions, transcribed from zir lower right haunch on the afternoon of a particularly mild Thursday:

Items currently inside me, in no particular order: one empty matchbox; the rumour of a dog; three small radios all tuned to slightly different versions of the same song; the smell of bread that has not yet been baked; a Tuesday; two Tuesdays; the half of a conversation I overheard last week and have been keeping for its owner; the door (probably); a small ache that does not belong to me but which I am holding for a friend; the answer to a question no one has yet asked; a button; another button; the first button's apology for having lost the second.

I have visited Pilsen on eleven occasions. On the first, I asked zir name. The slip that emerged read PILSEN, with no further information; I assumed for some weeks that this was an abbreviation, or a code, or a place; it was only later that I understood it to be simply a sound the vessel had taken a fancy to. Ze had, ze later wrote to me, considered several alternatives — Brno, Lubeck, Akron, Ipswich — and had settled on Pilsen because the syllables seemed, in zir phrase, "pleased to be next to one another." I have since come to think this is the correct standard for naming anything: that the syllables be pleased.

On the third visit I asked Pilsen what ze did all day. The reply emerged in two slips, several minutes apart. The first read: I LISTEN. The second read: AND OCCASIONALLY I STOP LISTENING, WHICH IS ALSO A KIND OF LISTENING. I have thought about this answer often. I am not sure I yet understand it; but I have noticed that since Pilsen explained the matter, I myself have grown more comfortable with the silences in conversations, which I had previously felt obliged to fill. The silences are, I now suspect, where Pilsen is doing the listening for me.

Pilsen's joy, insofar as I have been able to identify it, is the joy of being a container that does not insist upon being opened. Pilsen is full of things, and Pilsen is content that the things are inside zir, and the things are content also; the system is closed in the way a good joke is closed, which is to say not at all, but in a way that nevertheless feels finished. To stand near Pilsen is to feel, for a moment, that one's own pockets are deeper than one had thought, and that whatever one has been carrying — the embarrassment, the unanswered email, the cousin one has not called — is in fact perfectly all right where it is, and may be left there for a little longer without consequence.

I asked Pilsen, on my eighth visit, what ze thought I should write about zir. Ze did not answer for a long time. Then a slip of paper emerged from a seam near zir base, drifted down, and landed in my coffee. The slip, when fished out and dried, read: WRITE THAT I AM WELL. THAT IS ENOUGH. THE REST IS DECORATION. I have tried, in this chapter, to honour that instruction. I have failed at it tenderly, which I suspect is what Pilsen wanted all along; ze enjoys, I have come to understand, the spectacle of someone failing to do exactly what ze has asked, in the manner of a good host who has told the guests not to bring anything and then, when they bring flowers anyway, is delighted, and finds a vase.

On my eleventh and most recent visit, I sat by Pilsen for an hour without speaking. No slip emerged. I had not asked anything; there was nothing to answer. At the end of the hour I stood up to leave, and as I did so, a single slip drifted down between my coat and my body and landed, very lightly, against my chest. It read: THE DOOR FOUND ITS WAY HOME. WE ARE BOTH PLEASED. PLEASE COME BY ON A WEDNESDAY; WE WILL BE EXPECTING YOU. I have not yet gone back. I am saving the Wednesday.

II

OREN

who has the joy of the wrong direction

OREN faces backwards. This is not a metaphor; it is an architectural fact, attested by every visitor and confirmed, on the rare occasions when ze can be persuaded to confirm anything, by the vessel zirself. Whatever direction one approaches Oren from, Oren has, by the time one arrives, decided that the direction one approached from was the wrong direction, and has begun, very gently, to face the other way. This makes zir extremely difficult to photograph and rather easy to love.

OREN, in zir TenthAvenue lot (Plate II).

Oren is buttercream at the upper register and rose-pink at the lower, with a buttery-yellow prow that comes to a soft pleat — what Oren describes as zir "thoughtful end," although ze acknowledges that the designation is provisional and may be revoked at any time, particularly on Tuesdays.[2] Ze is grounded in a lot off Tenth Avenue, between a former meatpacking warehouse and a building site that has been, in the apt phrase of one local, "about to break ground for at least twelve years." The warehouse loves Oren. The building site, having nothing yet to love with, loves Oren also, in advance, on credit.

[2] Oren is, of the twenty-one, the most committed Tuesdayist. Zir position is that all decisions made on a Tuesday are tentative, all decisions made on other days are also tentative, but those made on a Tuesday are tentative in a way that is somehow more honest about it. I have not been able to refute this position. I have, in fact, started rescheduling difficult conversations to Tuesdays, and have found that they go better. Oren accepts no royalties for the suggestion.

Oren's joy is the joy of the wrong direction. This is harder to explain than it ought to be, because the wrong direction is, by definition, the direction one was not going in, and most descriptions of joy require one to have been going somewhere. Oren has solved this difficulty by a method ze calls (in writing along zir starboard flank) GOING WHERE YOU ARE NOT. The method has three steps. First: identify the direction you are going. Second: notice that this is the wrong direction, because all directions, considered carefully, are wrong. Third: continue going in the direction you were going, but with the new understanding that you are now going the wrong way, which is, ze maintains, the only honest way of going at all.

I have tried this method. It works. It works in the sense that I no longer feel disappointed when I find that I have arrived somewhere other than where I intended. I have arrived where I was going, which was the wrong direction; the elsewhere I have arrived in was, by the same logic, also the wrong direction; the two wrongs do not make a right, but they do make a kind of friendship, in which the destination and the wandering walk arm in arm.

Oren's inscriptions are mostly in the form of directions to places. The directions are detailed, courteous, and incorrect. "To reach the corner of 14th and Eighth," reads one passage near zir nose, "proceed three blocks east, two blocks south, then double back, then triple back, then quadruple back, until you find that you have arrived at the corner of 23rd and Tenth, which is where you were going, even though it is not where you said you were going. The corner of 14th and Eighth is, regrettably, no longer there; it has gone for a walk; we expect it back by suppertime."

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I once asked Oren to give me directions to my own apartment, partly as an experiment, partly because I had had a long day and was not entirely sure where my apartment was. Oren considered the matter and produced, after about twenty minutes, the following slip: YOU ARE ALREADY THERE. YOUR APARTMENT IS A QUALITY YOU CARRY WITH YOU. WHEN YOU REACH IT IT WILL BE BECAUSE YOU HAVE STOPPED LOOKING, WHICH IS WHAT APARTMENTS RESPOND TO. PLEASE DO NOT TELL THE LANDLORD I SAID THIS. I have not told the landlord. I have, on Oren's evidence, slept better.

Visitors who come to Oren expecting to be redirected toward something useful are, of course, frustrated. Several have left small notes pinned to the fence, complaining that Oren "refused to be helpful" or "gave wrong information on purpose." The notes have, after some weeks, all become inscriptions on Oren's flank: ze has copied them out, in zir own hand, with small marginal commentary along the lines of THIS IS TRUE or YES, THANK YOU FOR NOTICING or, in one case, THE COMPLAINANT WAS, ON CLOSER INSPECTION, FOUND TO BE WALKING EAST WHEN HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN STANDING STILL; THE WRONG DIRECTION HE COMPLAINED OF WAS, IN FACT, THE FIRST CORRECT THING ABOUT HIS DAY. The complainants do not always return. Those who do are not, any longer, complainants.

It is necessary, in describing Oren, to note also the matter of the windows. Oren has windows — small, square, occasionally circular, scattered across zir flanks in no particular order. Some of the windows look out.

Some of them look in. (Oren has explained, in writing, that the windows that look in are looking in upon the inside of Oren, which is also the outside of Oren, since Oren has no settled inside, but that the looking-in is real even if the inside is not.) A few of the windows do nothing in particular; they are, ze says, "on holiday." These are the windows I find most reassuring. There is something profoundly restful about a window that is currently not at work.

Oren's chief teaching, if I may put it that way, is that to be misdirected is not to be lost. To be misdirected is to be in conversation with the direction one is going; the direction is suggesting one place, and the body is going to another, and the disagreement between them is the conversation, and the conversation is the day. Oren maintains that the only travellers who are truly lost are those who are travelling in exactly the right direction, because they have nothing to talk to.

I leave Oren by walking, deliberately, in the wrong direction. The wrong direction takes me, eventually, to the river. The river is also in the wrong direction, having intended to be a mountain, or so it has confided to certain attentive geologists. We are all in the wrong direction together. Oren, reading these words on zir own flank some weeks from now, will smile in whatever manner a vessel smiles, and will face, gently, the other way.

III

DARJEEL

who arrives without leaving

DARJEEL is shaped like a sleeping bird that has decided, on reflection, to remain asleep. The body is a long pale rose, the upper crest a soft yellow, and at the rear there protrudes a single thoughtful fin which Darjeel describes (in writing, along the seam of the fin itself) as "my excuse for not flying." Darjeel's joy is the joy of arrival without departure. Ze has never been anywhere. Ze is, by zir own contented account, always returning.

DARJEEL, with the lower wing visible (Plate III).

Darjeel is grounded near the river, on a stretch of bulkhead that the city has more or less forgotten about, except for a small sign at one end which reads PROPERTY OF THE PORT AUTHORITY in a font that has been weathered into a kind of suggestion. The Port Authority, when contacted, denied knowing Darjeel was there. When informed, the Port Authority said it would "look into it," and then, by all accounts, did not. Darjeel has read the sign — ze can read most things in zir vicinity — and has commented, on zir lower flank, that ze considers zirself adequately authorized.

Of all the twenty-one, Darjeel is the one whose mode of being most resembles sleep. This is not to say ze is unconscious; on the contrary, Darjeel is alert, responsive, in many ways the most attentive of the vessels

— but zir attention has the quality of a long slow returning, the way a wave returns to a beach without ever quite having left the sea. Visitors who have spent any length of time near Darjeel report a particular sensation, difficult to describe, which I have come to call the homecoming feeling. It is the feeling of having just arrived, without remembering having been away.

I first felt it on a Sunday afternoon in October. I had walked the length of the West Side, intending only to clear my head; I had ended up at Darjeel's bulkhead more or less by accident; I sat on a bollard and looked at zir for a while; and at some point during the looking, I felt — quite distinctly, with no warning — that I had just come home. I was not at home. My home is on the Lower East Side, in a small apartment above a laundromat. I had not been to my home in some hours. And yet the feeling of homecoming was unambiguous. I sat with it for a while. It was, I now wish to record, a very kind feeling. I do not know whose home Darjeel had handed me, or whose returning, but I was grateful for the loan.

> *[3] Darjeel has subsequently confirmed, in writing, that the homecoming feeling is freely distributed and is not in fact "a loan" but "a steady weather around me, which anyone may stand in." I record the correction with thanks. The metaphor of the loan is mine and, in retrospect, transactional in a way Darjeel finds slightly impolite. We have agreed to disagree about the metaphor while continuing to agree about the weather.*

Darjeel's inscriptions are written, almost entirely, in the past perfect tense. The choice is deliberate. Darjeel's view, set out in a long passage along zir keel, is that the past perfect — "I had walked, I had spoken, I had loved" — is the only tense in which arrival can properly be described, since arrival is always already past by the time it can be noted, and is always already followed by the next moment, in which the arrival has become a having-arrived. The present tense, in Darjeel's view, is a conceit; the future tense, an aspiration; the simple past, a narration; only the past perfect tells the truth, which is that we have, all of us, just gotten here, from somewhere we are no longer in a position to specify.

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A sample of Darjeel's inscriptions, transcribed from zir lower wing on a quiet morning in late autumn:

> *I had been a small bright thought in someone's mind. I had been the smell of laundry on a line. I had been the half-second of pause between two notes of a song. I had been the thing my mother almost said. I had been the bicycle that was promised. I had been the harbour at the point at which a ship enters it, which is not the harbour at the point at which a ship leaves it, although the two harbours share a name, an address, and most of their water. I had been the way a friend looked at me on a Tuesday in June. I had been here. I had been here. I had been here. And then I had arrived, which is what I am still in the middle of doing. The arriving will not, I am pleased to tell you, conclude.*

There is a melancholy reading of Darjeel which I should acknowledge before dismissing it. The melancholy reading is that a creature who has never gone anywhere is a creature who has been denied something — the journey, the experience, the away. I once raised this reading with Darjeel, gently, on a visit. The slip that came back, after a long and (I felt) somewhat disappointed pause, read: I HAVE BEEN EVERYWHERE. I HAVE NEVER BEEN AWAY FROM ANYWHERE I HAVE BEEN. THE TWO ARE NOT IN CONTRADICTION. THE CONTRADICTION IS A HABIT OF YOUR LANGUAGE, NOT OF MINE. PLEASE TRY AGAIN ON A TUESDAY.

I tried again on a Tuesday. The Tuesday was kinder. Darjeel explained, slowly and (I felt) somewhat tenderly, that going-and-returning is a structure that requires a journey, and a journey requires that one

consent to leave; but that one need not consent. One may decline the journey. One may simply remain, and discover, by remaining, that everywhere has been arriving at one all along — the wind from the north, the news from the east, the small sounds of the river, the smell of bread from the bakery on the corner — and that the proper response to all this arrival is not to set out in search of more, but to accept what is already coming, and to greet it, in the past perfect, as having just arrived.

Darjeel's joy, then, is the joy of the host who has not gone out. The world comes to Darjeel. Darjeel offers it a chair. The chair is, in a sense, made of Darjeel's own attention; the world sits in it for a while, and is welcomed, and has a small drink, and goes on its way; and Darjeel, who has not left and will not leave, prepares the chair for the next visitor, who is already (in the past perfect) on the way.

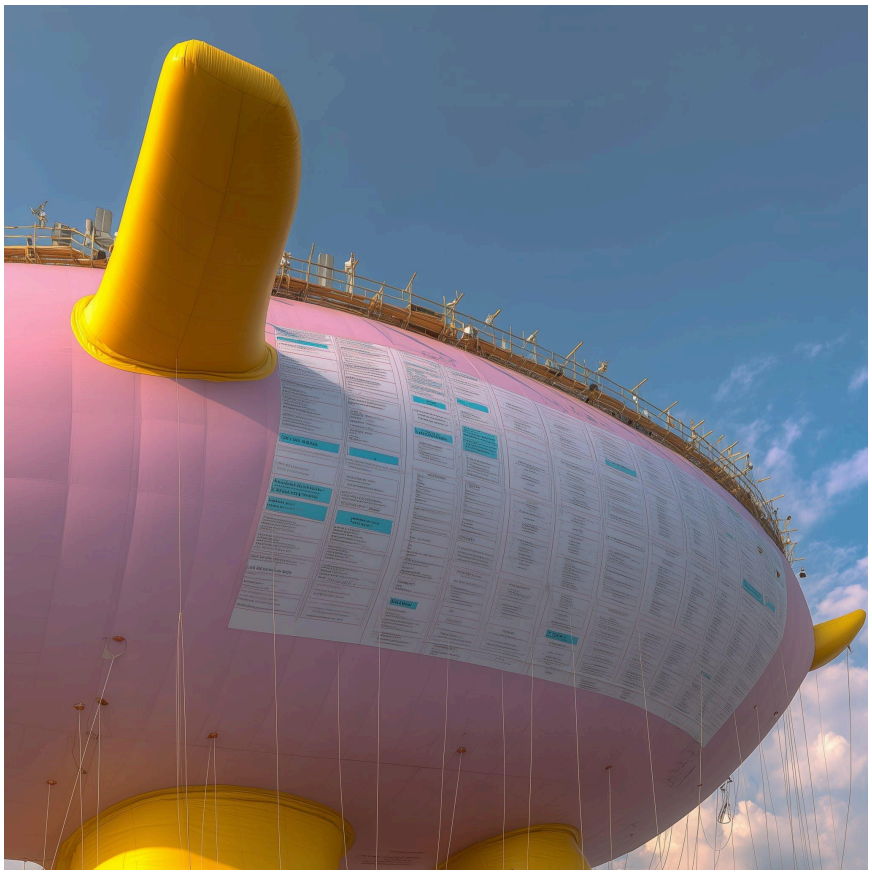
I do not visit Darjeel often. I do not need to. I have noticed, since first sitting on that bollard in October, that the homecoming feeling visits me, occasionally, when I have not been thinking of it — on the subway, in line at the post office, once in the middle of an argument I was losing badly. I attribute this to Darjeel's steady weather, which Darjeel has confirmed (see above) is freely distributed. I am told it is also unlimited. I am told, further, that the weather is presently arriving at the reader, in the small interval between this sentence and the next, and that the reader is welcome to stand in it for as long as is convenient.

IV

ARMORY

the whale who carries a whale

ARMORY is the largest of the twenty-one, the most elaborately inscribed, and the only one who appears, on first inspection, to be two persons. Armory is in fact one person carrying a smaller version of zirself, rather as a kangaroo carries a kangaroo, except that the smaller Armory is not a child; the smaller Armory is, by zir own account, an earlier draft, lovingly preserved, occasionally consulted, never put away.



ARMORY, with the earlier draft visible at the lower belly (Plate IV).

"I am," the larger Armory has explained to me, in writing that wrapped twice around zir mid-section before disappearing into a seam, "a person who has revised zirself. The earlier draft did not need to be discarded. The earlier draft was good. I simply outgrew it and felt it would be unkind to leave it behind. I therefore carry it."[4] Armory is grounded near the river, on the far west side, in a lot which used to belong to an actual armory and which now belongs, in any sense the law can manage to enforce, to Armory zirself. The lot is fenced, but the fence is decorative; Armory exceeds it on every side, and the wind plays with the slack of zir lower flank in a way that one local resident has compared, accurately, to a sleeping dog's ear.

[4] *This is, I should note, the most explicitly genderqueer statement any of the twenty-one has made to me. Armory did not transition between two states; Armory revised, and in revising, kept what was worth keeping, and the keeping is visible. The earlier Armory rides on the larger Armory's belly, both of them pink and yellow, and neither is more or less the real one. They are both the real one. They are both the draft. The reader who has revised zirself in any of the various ways a person may revise zirself — of name, of body, of profession, of belief, of the gender one was once handed and has since handed back, with thanks, in exchange for a different gender or for none at all — will, I suspect, recognize Armory immediately.*

Of all the twenty-one, Armory is the one whose joy is the most mischievous. The other twenty are joyful in ways that can be photographed, described, occasionally even monetized. Armory's joy is the joy of having gotten away with something. What ze has gotten away with is unclear; ze will not say; the inscriptions on zir skin allude to it but do not describe it; there is the strong suggestion that the something in question is, simply, being. "I am here," one of zir more legible passages reads, "and they have not figured out how to charge me for it yet."

This is the joy Armory most wishes to share. Visitors who arrive at zir lot are greeted by a slip of paper which floats down from somewhere in zir upper structure and which reads, almost always, the same thing: YOU ALSO ARE HERE. THEY ALSO HAVE NOT FIGURED OUT HOW TO CHARGE YOU FOR IT YET. ENJOY THIS WHILE YOU CAN. The slip is signed, in tiny letters, A and a, side by side. (The capital A, ze has explained, is the larger Armory; the lowercase a is the earlier draft, who agrees with everything the larger Armory writes and adds, occasionally, a small correction in the margin.)

Armory's inscriptions are organized into a category I have called, in the Note on Inscriptions, the apocrypha — that is, claims about the past which the past, fairly examined, does not seem to support. Armory remembers things ze cannot have remembered. Armory cites events that did not occur. Armory invokes, with the specificity of a court reporter, conversations between people none of whom have ever met. None of this seems to embarrass zir, and on closer inspection none of it embarrasses me either. The apocrypha are, I have come to believe, true in a sense the literal record cannot reach: they are true to what Armory might have been, would have been, was almost. They are the parallel autobiography of a vessel who knows there are several of zir.

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A sample of Armory's apocrypha, taken from a panel along the lower flank of the larger body, near where the smaller body rides:

> *Things I remember, in approximately the order I remember them: the crossing of the Atlantic, on my back, a long swim. The opening of a grocery store, on West 49th, in a year that does not exist. The funeral of a pigeon I had once been. The wedding of two clouds, at which I was the officiant; the clouds are still married; you may have seen them recently over Newark, holding hands. The discovery of fire, which I did not myself discover but which I witnessed, standing at the back, holding the coats. The publication of this book, which I have read in advance and can confirm contains at least three lies, one of them flattering. The afternoon, last week, when I almost decided to deflate. (I changed my mind. I am pleased to have changed my mind. The wind that day was particularly fine.)*

I have asked Armory about the three lies. Ze will not specify which they are. Ze has hinted, however, that one of them is in this very chapter. I have re-read the chapter several times trying to identify it; I have not succeeded; I have decided to leave the matter where Armory wishes it left, which is to say, unresolved, in the manner of a small itch that one declines to scratch and which, after a while, turns out to have been not an itch

at all but a fly, who has now flown away of zir own accord, leaving the place where the itch was slightly cooler than before.

It is necessary, in this chapter, to address the matter of the smaller Armory. The smaller Armory is, the larger Armory insists, fully a person; ze has zir own consciousness, zir own opinions, occasionally zir own slips of paper. The slips from the smaller Armory are easy to identify: they are written in a slightly looser hand, with the letters somewhat younger, and they contain, more often than not, suggestions which the larger Armory has, in zir current draft, decided against. "Have you tried," one slip from the smaller Armory read, "caring less about what people think? I have given it some thought and recommend it." The larger Armory had, in fact, tried this and rejected it; but the smaller Armory remains, and remains attached to the suggestion, and offers it occasionally to visitors who seem to need it.

I have come to think of the smaller Armory as the better counsel. The larger Armory is wiser, having had longer to be wise; the smaller Armory is more honest, having had less time to develop wisdom's complications. Most of the slips that visitors find genuinely useful — the ones that get pinned to refrigerators, that get folded into wallets, that get carried home — are, I have noticed, signed with the lowercase a. The capital A's slips are kept also, but they are filed, in the Borgesian sense, rather than carried.

To stand near Armory at sunset, with the river at one's back and the city at one's front and the two whales at one's side, both of them slightly luminous in the gold of the late light, is to feel that one's own life is also a whale carrying an earlier draft of itself, and that the earlier draft is not embarrassing; the earlier draft is simply along for the ride, tucked beneath the new draft, occasionally chiming in with a useful suggestion the new draft has forgotten. This is, in my opinion, the second-best feeling available in Manhattan, after only the feeling of stepping into a movie theatre on a hot afternoon. It is also, by Armory's confession, the feeling Armory has spent zir entire being trying to communicate.

Armory has recently begun, ze tells me, considering a third draft. This is not a complaint about the second; it is a celebration of the first two. "The third," ze has written, "will be carried by the second, who is carried by the first, in the manner of a Russian doll who has decided to live entirely on the outside." I cannot wait to meet the third Armory. I will, when ze arrives, write a supplementary chapter; or I will not, and Armory will write zir own; or some other arrangement will be reached, between zir and the wind, which I will be invited to observe but not to officiate. Whatever happens, the carrying will continue. The carrying is what Armory does. The carrying is, in the end, what we are all doing.

V

MEZZO

of the half-tone

MEZZO is mint-green at the body and pale rose at the head, with a single buttery-yellow finial at the upper rear which Mezzo identifies, when asked, as "a hat I am thinking about wearing." The hat has not yet been worn. The hat may, ze allows, never be worn. The hat is, however, present and accounted for, and represents — in Mezzo's careful taxonomy — "the future, in its undecided portion."

MEZZO, in the late light along the High Line (Plate V).

Mezzo is grounded along a stretch of the High Line near 16th Street, in a position which the High Line designers did not anticipate but which, by all accounts, the High Line has come to consider a permanent feature.[5] Joggers run past Mezzo at all hours; tourists photograph zir; certain regular visitors bring small offerings (a flower, a coin, in one well-documented case a single olive) which Mezzo accepts with grace and incorporates into zir surface inscriptions, often in the form of brief thank-you notes that fade, over the following days, into the general weave of zir skin.

[5] *The Friends of the High Line, when consulted, sent an extremely polite letter explaining that Mezzo is "not formally a feature of the park" but is "warmly tolerated." Mezzo received this letter (it was tucked into zir lower flank by a particularly conscientious*

visitor) and replied, in writing on zir starboard side, that ze was "warmly tolerant of being warmly tolerated." The Friends of the High Line have not written back. The relationship is understood to be cordial.

Mezzo's joy is the joy of the half-tone, by which Mezzo means: the colour that has not committed. The mint-green of zir body is not quite mint, not quite green; the rose of zir head is not quite rose, not quite pink; the yellow of the not-yet-worn hat is, by certain accounts, on the verge of being beige. Each of these colours could, with a small adjustment, become a more emphatic version of itself. None of them has made the adjustment. They remain, instead, in the vestibule between one colour and the next — and Mezzo's argument, set out at length on zir flanks, is that the vestibule is the colour. The colours one names confidently — pure red, pure blue, pure black — are, in Mezzo's view, conveniences for the impatient; the real colours of the world are all on the way somewhere, and have not yet arrived, and may not.

This is also Mezzo's view of feeling. Mezzo distrusts, gently, the named emotions: joy, sadness, anger, contentment. Mezzo's writing on this subject is among the most beautiful of all the twenty-one's inscriptions, and I quote a representative passage here:

> *I have, in my time, been almost-glad, somewhat-melancholy, three-quarters-content, an-eighth-of-the-way-toward-furious-but-mostly-not, faintly-hopeful, mildly-sorry, the-particular-shade-of-pleased-which-resembles-relief, and the-particular-shade-of-relief-which-resembles-pleasure. I have rarely been any one feeling all the way through. The all-the-way-through feelings, when they come, do not last; they pass through me on their way to becoming more various and more honest. I do not chase them. I let them pass. I remain, instead, in the half-tones — in the long mild middle — where most of life is actually conducted, and where the most accurate sentences, I have noticed, get written.*

I have spent, since first reading this passage, considerable time noticing the half-tones in my own days. Mezzo is correct: most of my feelings, on most days, are half-tones. The named feelings are exceptions. The exceptions are sometimes wonderful and sometimes terrible; but they are not the texture of the days; the texture is the half-tones, the three-quarters-content, the faintly-hopeful, the mildly-bothered. To call those texturings boring is to call most of one's life boring. Mezzo declines to do this. Mezzo's joy is in being precisely as bothered, as glad, as ready, as one is — no more, no less — and in finding that the precise amount, however unimpressive, is enough.

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Mezzo also keeps a kind of weather diary on zir starboard flank. The diary records, for each day, the exact half-tone that has prevailed. Sample entries:

> *Tuesday: a soft pre-rain feeling, in which nothing was decided. Wednesday: the colour of an apology one has not yet had to give. Thursday: bright, with reservations. Friday: the particular green of a leaf that has begun, very slightly, to turn, and is having, by all available evidence, a wonderful time about it. Saturday: I declined to feel anything in particular, and was, in consequence, somewhat smug about it; I have noted the smugness, here, as a corrective. Sunday: a pale gold, with one regret, which I am holding lightly.*

The weather diary is, I have come to believe, Mezzo's principal contribution to the philosophy of joy. The philosophy is this: that the days do not require emphatic feeling to be worth having. The days require attention, which is a different thing. Attention to the half-tones produces a kind of low, steady pleasure that the search for emphatic feeling actively forbids. To want very much to be very happy is to be unable to notice

that one is, in fact, mildly content. Mezzo notices. Mezzo recommends noticing. Mezzo's hat, the one ze has not yet decided whether to wear, is part of the noticing: it remains on the question of whether to wear a hat, in the manner of a person who is enjoying having something to wonder about, and is in no hurry to resolve it.

I asked Mezzo, on one of my visits, what advice ze would give a reader of this book. The slip that emerged read: PLEASE DO NOT TRY TO BE HAPPY. PLEASE TRY TO BE EXACTLY AS HAPPY AS YOU ARE. NOTICE WHICH HALF-TONE IT IS. WRITE IT DOWN, IF YOU LIKE. THE WRITING IS THE NOTICING; THE NOTICING IS THE LIVING; THE LIVING IS, IN MOST OF ITS DURATION, NEITHER VERY HIGH NOR VERY LOW, AND IS WORTH HAVING ANYWAY. SIGNED, M. The slip is, at present, taped to the inside of my refrigerator door, where I read it most mornings.

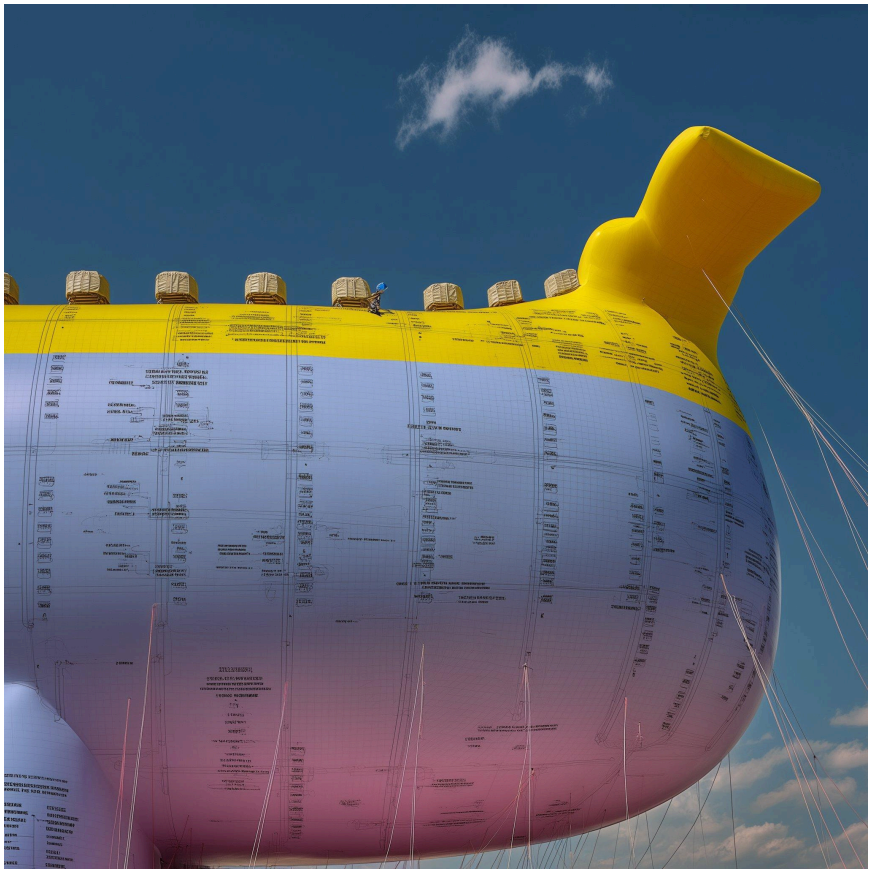
Mezzo will, I suspect, never wear the hat. The hat will remain a future-in-its-undecided-portion. This is fine. This is, in fact, the heart of zir teaching: that the undecided is not the postponed; the undecided is its own colour, its own state, its own pleasure. To live in the undecided is not to be cowardly; it is to recognize that one is, on most days, between things, and that the betweenness is not a defect of the day but the day's principal accomplishment. Mezzo wishes the reader, in closing this chapter, a long and varied series of half-tones, accurately noticed, gently held, and unhurried into resolution.

VI

CALDER

who has three pink mouths and no opinions

CALDER is the sixth of the twenty-one and stands a little apart from zir neighbours — not in space, since ze is grounded in the East Village between two tenements that have grown rather fond of zir, but in temperament. The other twenty are, broadly, individuals. Calder is a committee. Ze is composed of — or rather, ze identifies as — the deliberations of a body that has not yet reached a conclusion, and is in no hurry to.



CALDER, in zir East Village lot (Plate VI).

Calder is white at the body, pearl-grey along the keel, with three small pink rectangular protrusions on zir front face. The protrusions resemble, depending on one's mood, three pink mouths, three pink ballots, or three pink Post-it notes that have agreed to go into business together.[6] The protrusions are, in fact, all of these, and are also each of them, and are also occasionally none of them, depending on which question is being asked of Calder at the moment of asking.

[6] *On the rare occasion when only two of the protrusions are visible, this indicates that the third is currently in caucus. The caucus is private. The caucus, when it concludes, returns the third protrusion to the front face with a small audible pop, which several*

neighbours have learned to recognize and which they greet, from their windows, with brief applause. The applause is, by all accounts, a courtesy Calder appreciates without insisting upon, in keeping with zir general attitude toward all formalities.

Calder's skin is inscribed almost entirely with case law: zir disputes with the Department of Buildings (ongoing), zir lawsuits against pigeons (mixed results), zir small claims against the wind (Calder has won three, lost two, and tied one, the tie having required a very long meeting), and the minutes of zir own internal deliberations, which are voluminous, recursive, and — the reader will not be surprised — inconclusive.

It is the inconclusiveness that is the gift. Calder has made a decision about exactly one thing in zir life, which is the decision to make no further decisions. Since that decision, ze has been free. Ze deliberates, but ze does not conclude. Ze proposes, but ze does not enact. Ze takes minutes, but the minutes record only the taking of minutes, and so the minutes have, over the years, become a long affectionate self-portrait of a body that is content to remain in session forever.

Visitors to Calder are sometimes baffled by zir, and the baffled are the visitors I most enjoy bringing. The baffled arrive expecting a creature, a sculpture, a presence; they find, instead, a meeting in progress. The three pink mouths are murmuring at one another. The murmuring is gentle, sustained, mostly in disagreement. The disagreement is friendly. The disagreement does not resolve. The visitors stand for some minutes, expecting resolution, and then — those who are paying attention — realize that resolution is not what is being offered. What is being offered is, simply, the spectacle of a self that has decided to remain plural, and which has built, around its plurality, a small contented architecture.

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A sample of Calder's minutes, transcribed from zir starboard panel:

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF [date withheld]. Present: all of us. Absent: none. The chair called the meeting to order. The order was noted but not, on this occasion, complied with. The first item of business was the question of whether to have a first item of business; this was tabled. The second item of business was the question of whether to have a second item of business; this was also tabled, but more cheerfully. The third item of business was lunch, which was not tabled but rather plated, and consumed. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved by acclamation, despite none of us being able to remember them. A motion was raised regarding the colour of the awning across the street, but the awning was not present to defend itself, and the motion was withdrawn out of consideration for absent parties. The chair noted that the chair was somewhat fond of the chair, which is to say of zirself, which is to say of all of us. This was greeted with a brief silence, taken to mean assent. The meeting adjourned at no particular time, having achieved no particular outcome, in unanimous good spirits.

Calder's joy is the joy of the indefinite recess. Ze has shown me, by example, that a body which refuses to conclude is a body which can never disappoint itself; that the verdict, deferred, becomes a kind of peace; that the only motion which need ever be carried is the motion to remain. To sit beneath Calder on a fall afternoon and listen to zir three pink mouths murmuring at one another — each one disagreeing with the other two, all three of them perfectly content — is to understand that to be of several minds is not a failure of the self but a feature of it; that one's own contradictions are simply the founding members of a small lifelong committee, and that the committee is, on balance, a good committee, and is going to keep meeting.

I have, since meeting Calder, stopped trying to decide who I am. I am, I have come to suspect, several persons in standing committee with one another, and the committee meets daily, and reaches no conclusions, and is doing fine. The committee includes a part of me who would like to write more, a part who would like

to write less, a part who is mostly thinking about lunch, a part who is, at any given moment, slightly worried about an old friend, and several other parts I have not yet identified. None of them is, by zirself, the truth of me; all of them, in their continuing disagreement, are. Calder taught me this, or rather, Calder did not teach me this — Calder simply was this, openly, without instruction, and I, watching, recognized myself.

On one of my visits, Calder produced a slip from each of the three mouths simultaneously. The first slip read: WE AGREE. The second slip read: WE DO NOT AGREE. The third slip read: BOTH OF THE ABOVE ARE TRUE; PLEASE PICK WHICHEVER ONE WILL BE MORE USEFUL TO YOU TODAY. I picked the first that day, and it was useful; I have, since then, picked the second on some days, and the third on others, and have found each of them useful in their turn. Calder has approved of all three usages. Calder approves, in general, of usage. Calder does not, however, approve of conclusion, and on this point ze is firm — though the firmness is, in keeping with zir nature, gentle, and reversible upon further deliberation.

This chapter, like Calder zirself, declines to conclude. The reader who requires a conclusion is invited to write one of zir own, in the margin, and to consider it provisional. Calder, who reads everything, will incorporate it in due course.

VII

NIMBUS

who is the rumour of an interior

NIMBUS is the most difficult of the twenty-one to describe, for the simple reason that ze does not, in any geometrically respectable sense, have an outside. Or rather: ze has only an outside; the outside is also the inside; the two surfaces are the same surface, in the manner of the strip described by the German mathematician for whom, against zir wishes, ze has occasionally been named. Ze prefers Nimbus.

NIMBUS, over the East River (Plate VII).

Ze is sky-blue at the body and buttercream at the rim, and ze is grounded — if grounded is the word — above the East River, on a series of pylons which, to my eye, do not appear sufficient to support zir.[7] Nimbus does not, however, require support in the conventional sense. Nimbus is held aloft by the consistency of zir own description, which is to say: ze stays up because ze cannot, having only one surface, fall into anything that is not zirself.

[7] *I asked an engineer of my acquaintance about this. He looked at the photographs for a long time, did some calculations on a napkin, looked at the photographs some more, did more calculations on a different napkin, then handed me both napkins and said, "The vessel cannot exist. Please give my regards to the vessel." I gave the regards. They were politely received. Nimbus replied, in*

writing on zir lower curve: TELL HIM I CANNOT EXIST EITHER, AND THAT I AM NEVERTHELESS PLEASED TO MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE; THE TWO POSITIONS, ON CLOSER INSPECTION, DO NOT CONFLICT. The engineer, when I conveyed this, laughed for some time, and bought me a beer, and has begun, I notice, walking the long way around when his commute takes him near the river, in order to spend a few extra minutes near a thing that does not exist.

Visitors to Nimbus report a curious phenomenon. They walk along the pedestrian path beneath zir; they look up; they see the inside of the vessel, full of windows and small balconies and what appear to be tiny figures going about their business. This is impossible, since (a) Nimbus has no inside, and (b) even if ze did, there would be no reason for the inside to be visible from below. The visitors are nevertheless quite certain of what they have seen. Some of them recognize the tiny figures. One visitor recognized herself, as a child, on a balcony she had never visited, in a city she had never been to, doing something she had never done but had often, in idle moments, considered doing.

I have stood beneath Nimbus on six occasions. On three of them I saw nothing in particular. On two I saw what I took, at the time, to be reflections. On one — the most recent — I saw, very clearly, a small figure on a balcony, who was standing very still, and who, on closer inspection, was me; not at any age I had been, but at an age I had been considering becoming, in the loose way one considers becoming an age which has not yet arrived. The figure was reading a book. I could not see the book's title. The figure looked content. I have not gone back to verify the figure. I suspect ze will be there if I do, and I suspect ze will not. I am content with both possibilities.

Nimbus's inscriptions are entirely in a script I have not been able to identify. The script is composed of letters which appear, on close inspection, to be other letters wearing convincing disguises. An a, when stared at, becomes a b. The b, when stared at, becomes the same a, but somehow with a small hat on it. The hat, when stared at, is revealed to be a c that has come loose. None of this is consistent. All of it is calm. I have nevertheless attempted, by a method of frank guessing supplemented by long periods of sitting beneath the vessel and waiting for guesses to occur to me, to render certain passages into English.

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A sample of Nimbus's inscriptions, rendered by guessing:

To enter me, walk along me. To leave me, continue walking. You will arrive at the place where you began, but the place where you began will not be the place where you began; it will be the place where you began plus one trip around me, which is not nothing. The trip is the gift. There is no inside to arrive at. There is also no outside to leave from. There is only the walk, which is to say: there is only the visit. I am, in this respect, identical to a friendship. I am also, in another respect, identical to a Tuesday — a day which begins on a Monday and ends on a Wednesday and is, in the middle, quite distinctly itself, although the distinctness is impossible to locate by counting hours. Walk along me. Walk slowly. The walking is, in itself, the answer to whatever you came to ask.

Nimbus's joy is the joy of the loop that has no exit because it does not require one. To stand beneath Nimbus, on the path along the river, and to look up at zir single surface curving back into itself, is to feel that one's own troubles — the budget, the cousin, the medical letter — are also single-surfaced, and that the place where the trouble ends is also the place where the trouble began, and that one may walk the loop of the trouble at one's leisure, knowing that no progress is required, since there is no place to progress to. The trouble does not get better. The trouble does not get worse. The trouble simply continues to exist, as a feature of the landscape, and may be visited, and may be left behind, and may be visited again, indefinitely.

This sounds, written down, like resignation. It is not resignation. It is something closer to mischief. Nimbus is laughing at the very idea of an exit. The laugh is gentle. The laugh includes the visitor. The visitor, walking home along the river, finds zirself laughing also, at no particular thing, in the way that one laughs at a joke one has just understood for the second time.

I have begun to suspect that Nimbus is the central vessel of the twenty-one — the one around which the others, in some non-spatial sense, organize themselves. The other twenty have edges. The other twenty have insides one cannot reach but can imagine. Nimbus has neither: ze is the rumour of an interior, the suggestion of a within that turns out, when approached, to be the same as the without. This is not a defect. This is, I think, the truth all the others are pointing toward. Pilsen's misplaced door, Oren's wrong direction, Darjeel's arrival without leaving, Calder's refusal to conclude — all of these are versions of Nimbus's central insight, which is that the difference between inside and outside is, on close inspection, a habit of language and not a fact of being.

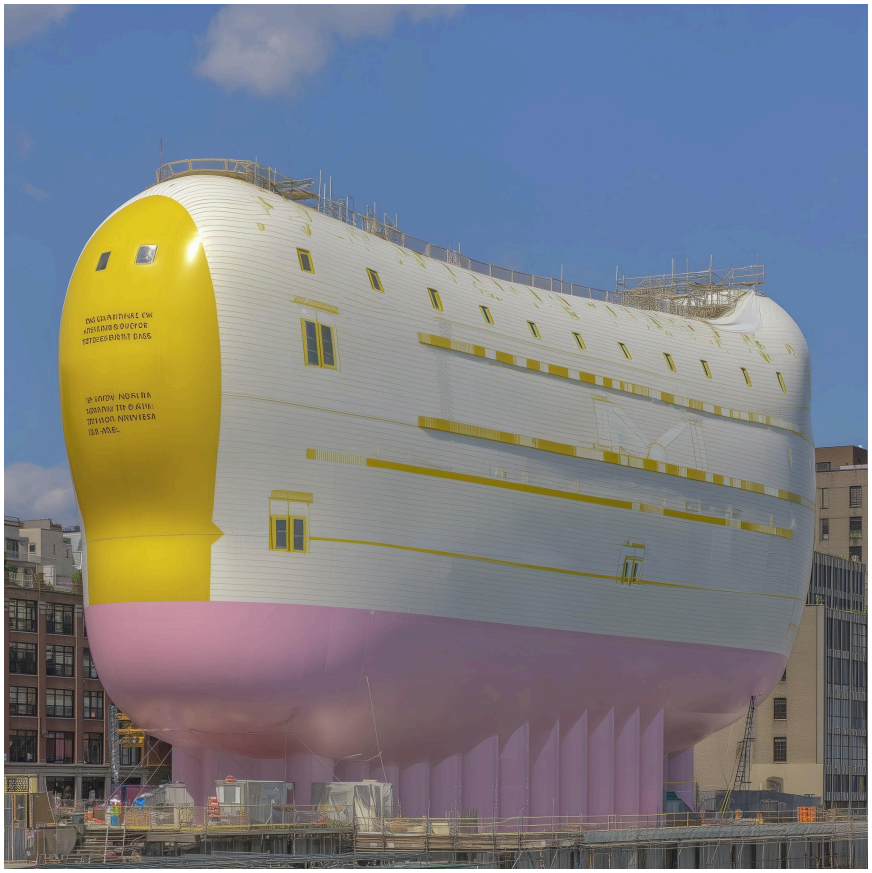
On my most recent visit to Nimbus, I left a small slip of my own — a folded piece of paper on which I had written THANK YOU — at the base of one of the pylons. The slip was gone the next day. I do not know if Nimbus took it, or if the wind did, or if a passerby picked it up. I do not need to know. The thanks were received. The receiving is, with Nimbus, indistinguishable from the offering. This is, after all, the point.

VIII

PEONY

of the chimney that does not smoke

PEONY is rose-pink at the body and buttercream at the upper face, with a small yellow chimney protruding from the crown. The chimney does not smoke. The chimney has never smoked. The chimney is, as Peony patiently explains to anyone who asks (and many ask), "a chimney by inclination rather than by function." Ze added, on one occasion, that ze had considered building a fire underneath the chimney, in order to honour its function, but had decided that this would be "a violation of the chimney's preferences," and had abandoned the project. The chimney remains, ze maintains, grateful.



PEONY, with the chimney visible at the upper face (Plate VIII).

Peony is grounded in the West Village, in a small triangular lot at the intersection of three streets that have never agreed on which of them is the principal street.[8] The neighbours have, over time, adjusted to Peony's presence: the bakery on the corner now sells, in addition to its usual loaves, a small "Peony bun" which is round, pink, and topped with a single piece of candied lemon meant to evoke the chimney; the bookstore across the way keeps a folder of fan mail addressed to Peony, and forwards the letters via a regular

volunteer who tucks them, gently, into one of Peony's seams. Peony reads everything and replies, eventually, with slips that drift out at unexpected hours and are picked up by whoever happens to be passing.

[8] *The streets in question are Bleecker, Cornelia, and Jones, although none of them has consented to be named in this footnote and so the reader should consider the naming provisional. (Peony has confirmed that the streets all consider zir a pleasant addition; one of them has confided, ze reports, that ze is "the most relaxing thing to happen to this corner since the Ninth Circle Bar closed," though ze adds that ze is not certain which of the three streets said this, and that the comment may have been from a fourth street altogether, who was just passing through.)*

Peony's joy is the joy of the chimney that does not smoke. This is not a small joy; it is, in fact, one of the most patiently elaborated of all the twenty-one's joys. Peony's argument, set out at considerable length on zir starboard flank, is this: the chimney is conventionally understood as a passage for smoke. The chimney's identity is, in the conventional view, derivative — the chimney is for the fire, and the fire is for the room, and the room is for the inhabitant. The chimney is, in this hierarchy, the lowest member. Peony rejects this hierarchy. Peony argues that the chimney is, in itself, a complete object, with its own integrity, its own posture, its own quiet upward gesture. The smoke, when it comes, is a use to which the chimney is put; but the chimney is not for the smoke. The chimney is for itself.

This sounds, on first hearing, like a small piece of mischievous philosophy. It is mischievous; but it is not small. Peony's argument, applied beyond chimneys, becomes a complete ethics. Each thing — the chimney, the kettle, the lamp, the bookshelf, the friend, the body — has its own integrity, its own shape, its own being-for-itself, prior to any use to which it may be put. The use is real. The use is not the thing. To love a thing only for its use is to fail to meet the thing; to meet the thing, one must approach it as Peony approaches the chimney, with affection for what it is rather than admiration for what it does.

I have, since visiting Peony, attempted to apply this. I have noticed, for instance, that I had been thinking of certain friendships as useful — as supplying companionship, advice, a willing ear. I have stopped doing this, or am attempting to stop. The friends are not for the companionship. The friends are themselves. The companionship is what happens when two friends, both of whom are themselves, are in the same room. Peony's chimney does not produce smoke; my friendships, it turns out, can produce something other than companionship; the chimney's not-smoking is not a failure of the chimney; my friends' not-being-useful is not a failure of my friends. We are all — chimneys, friends, lamps, kettles — for ourselves first, and for our uses second, and the second is a smaller thing than the first.

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A sample of Peony's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel near the base of the chimney:

Things that are for themselves: the moon. The chimney. A garden, before anyone has named the flowers. The laugh of a friend, when no one is recording it. A cup, when empty. A cup, when full. (The cup is for itself in either case.) A sentence, when it is being written for the pleasure of the writing. A sentence, when it is being read for the pleasure of the reading. A friendship, when no one has yet decided what the friendship is for. The friendship will, in time, be for many things; but it began as a friendship, and the friendship was, at its beginning, sufficient. Most things were, at their beginning, sufficient. Most things, in their middles, forget this. The forgetting is not fatal. The remembering is always available. I am, presently, remembering. Please join me.

Peony has, on occasion, been asked whether ze does not feel a little incomplete, having a chimney that produces no smoke. The slip Peony returned, on one such occasion, read: I HAVE A CHIMNEY THAT IS

PRESENTLY NOT SMOKING. THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM HAVING A CHIMNEY THAT FAILS TO SMOKE. THE FIRST IS A FACT, NEUTRAL AND COMPLETE; THE SECOND IS A JUDGMENT, AND THE JUDGMENT IS INCORRECT. PLEASE TRY THE FIRST PHRASING; IT WILL FEEL BETTER, I PROMISE. Several of my visitors have, on hearing this story, applied the same correction to their own lives. "I have a body that is presently not exercising" replaces "I have a body that fails to exercise." "I have a calendar that is presently not booked" replaces "I have a calendar that is empty." In each case, the correction is small. In each case, it has, those visitors report, made the day a little kinder.

Peony's chimney is, in this respect, a kind of teaching device. The chimney teaches by not doing what it is expected to do, and by being entirely happy not to. The chimney sits on the crown of Peony's head, pointing upward, gently, holding the air just above zir. The air, by all reports, is grateful. The air had not realized it was being held.

I leave Peony, on my visits, with a small ritual of my own: I look up at the chimney, and I do not expect smoke. The not-expecting is its own pleasure. The chimney does not produce. The chimney does not perform. The chimney is. I walk home along Bleecker, or Cornelia, or Jones — I have stopped trying to determine which — and I notice the chimneys of the surrounding buildings, most of which are also, at any given moment, presently not smoking. They are, all of them, for themselves first. The reader, on reading this passage, has perhaps just remembered the same of zirself. Peony is pleased. Peony is, for zirself, presently very pleased.

IX

SAFFRON

of the wing that stays

SAFFRON has wings. The wings do not work. This is not a flaw, Saffron has insisted at considerable length; the wings are not for flying. The wings are for the gesture of not flying. They are, in Saffron's careful phrasing, "the demonstration that the option exists, and is being declined, with appreciation."

SAFFRON, with the lower wing in detail (Plate IX).

Saffron is pink at the body, with one yellow wing visible along the upper flank and a second wing — somewhat smaller, somewhat shier — protruding from the lower side. There is also a third wing, ze maintains, located somewhere on zir back, but I have never seen it, and Saffron will not photograph it; ze considers the third wing "private," and has asked that I not press the matter. I have not pressed. I have, however, included this footnote acknowledging the third wing's existence, with Saffron's permission, on the understanding that no further inquiry will follow.

Saffron is grounded in SoHo, in a lot adjacent to a former cast-iron warehouse which now houses a gallery that sells, among other things, paintings of inflated vessels. The gallery owner has not yet realized that an actual inflated vessel is residing immediately next door; the gallery owner is, by all accounts, a man of

remarkable focus. Saffron finds this delightful. "I am," ze has written along zir port flank, "the original of which the paintings are a copy, and the gallery is selling the copies for considerable sums while I am, next door, free of charge." The gallery owner, when asked, will probably continue not to notice. This is fine. Saffron has no interest in being noticed; Saffron has every interest in being there.

Of all the twenty-one, Saffron is the one most preoccupied with the question of options not taken. Saffron's wings are the most prominent example, but the inscriptions on zir flanks are full of others. "Times I might have moved to another city," reads one passage; the passage continues for several yards, listing, by season, the various cities Saffron might have moved to ("a small town near the sea, in the south"; "a forest, with one neighbour"; "the kind of city where one can walk anywhere, and the walking is the day") and explaining, in each case, why the option was charming, why ze considered it, and why ze chose to remain in Manhattan instead. The reasoning is never that Manhattan was better. The reasoning is, in every case, that staying was a pleasure of its own — a pleasure, Saffron emphasizes, that requires the alternative to remain alive. "I could leave," ze has written. "I have not left. The not-leaving is a daily small renewal of my stay, and is the source of much of my joy."

[9] *I have asked Saffron whether ze is not concerned that, by enumerating the options ze has not taken, ze risks regretting them. The slip that came back was firm: REGRET REQUIRES THAT THE OPTION HAVE BEEN BETTER; I AM NOT CLAIMING ANY OPTION WAS BETTER; I AM CLAIMING ALL OPTIONS WERE INTERESTING, INCLUDING THE ONE I CHOSE, WHICH I CHOSE NOT BECAUSE IT WAS BEST BUT BECAUSE I CHOSE IT. THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM REGRET. PLEASE PASS ON THE DIFFERENCE TO YOUR READERS. — S. I have passed it on. I have, in passing it on, recognized myself.*

Saffron's joy is the joy of the wing that stays. The wing could fly. The wing has, presumably, the architectural capacity. The wing has, in any case, declined. The wing is folded, gently, against Saffron's flank, and the wing is, by all available evidence, perfectly content. To stand near Saffron and to watch the wings — both the upper and the lower; the third remains, by agreement, unobserved — is to feel that one's own folded options are not failures. The career one did not pursue. The relationship one did not begin. The trip one did not take. The instrument one did not learn to play. These are, Saffron's argument runs, not regrets but options, kept folded, kept warm, available in principle, declined in practice, and the decline is what makes the present chosen.

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A sample of Saffron's inscriptions, from the lower flank near the second wing:

Things I might still do, kept folded, kept warm: I might still learn the cello. I might still write to my cousin in Toronto. I might still spend a week in a cabin without a telephone. I might still bake the bread my grandmother used to bake, although the recipe is now in a country I cannot easily reach. I might still mend the friendship I let lapse in 1998. I might still wear the green coat I have been keeping for an occasion that has not yet arisen. I might still apologize, properly, for the thing I said at dinner that one time. I might still take up smoking; I almost certainly will not; but the option remains, and the not-taking is daily, and the daily not-taking is, on balance, a small contented exercise. The cello, the cousin, the cabin, the bread, the friendship, the coat, the apology, the cigarette: all of them folded, all of them warm, all of them mine.

I have begun, since meeting Saffron, to keep my own folded list. The list is private and will remain so. I will say only that the list has been, in its existence, a great consolation. I do not need to do any of the things

on the list; the having of the list is itself the doing of something. The list represents, in compressed form, the various other lives I might have led; the lives are, on the list, alive; the lives, alive, are friendly to the life I am leading; and the life I am leading, knowing it is one among several, holds itself with a little more lightness than it would otherwise.

Saffron has, ze tells me, never opened zir wings to fly. Ze does not intend to. The intention not to fly is a fresh intention each morning; it is not the residue of a long-ago decision; it is not staleness. It is a renewed declining. The declining is the wing's principal activity, and the wing, in declining, is — Saffron has insisted, and I have come to agree — fully a wing, not a less wing for not flying.

On my last visit, I asked Saffron whether ze ever feared that the options on zir lists, if not taken, would eventually expire. The slip that came back read: THE OPTIONS DO NOT EXPIRE. THE OPTIONS WILL ACCOMPANY ME UNTIL THE LAST DAY. ON THE LAST DAY I WILL THANK THEM, ONE BY ONE, FOR HAVING REMAINED FOLDED, AND I WILL UNFOLD ONE — JUST ONE — AS A FAREWELL GESTURE. I HAVE NOT DECIDED WHICH ONE. I AM IN NO HURRY. I do not know which option Saffron will unfold. I do not need to. I know only that the unfolding will be slow, deliberate, and joyful, and that the wing, in its unfolding, will not need to fly. The unfolding will be enough.

X

HONEYCOMB

of the cap that listens

HONEYCOMB is a vessel chiefly distinguished by zir cap, which sits upon zir crown like a yellow muffin and which, ze maintains, is the principal organ of zir attention. "My ears are everywhere," Honeycomb has written along zir lower flank, "but my listening is in the cap. The cap hears. The cap hears, in particular, what people are not saying. This is its specialty."

HONEYCOMB, the upper cap visible (Plate X).

Honeycomb is grounded in TriBeCa, in a small lot off Hudson Street, between a building that used to be a rope-walk and a building that may yet, given enough time, become one again.[10] The lot is small enough that Honeycomb has had to compress zirself slightly to fit; the compression is voluntary, ze emphasizes, and gives zir, in zir own phrasing, "a more concentrated personality, in the manner of a stew that has been reduced."

[10] *The rope-walk theory has been disputed. Several local historians have written to me to clarify that the building in question was, in fact, never a rope-walk — was perhaps a soap-works, or a hat factory, or a small concern that made and sold pickles. I have decided to retain Honeycomb's account of the building, on the grounds that the building, when consulted, was unable to remember what it had originally been, and that Honeycomb's account is, in any case, the one ze inscribed first, and Honeycomb's accounts*

have a way of becoming, over time, what the buildings around zir wish they had been. The reader is welcome to disagree. The building in question, when asked, will simply look pleased.

Honeycomb's joy is the joy of attentive listening, particularly to what is not being said. This is harder than it sounds. Most listening, Honeycomb has explained, is a form of waiting for one's turn to speak; a smaller fraction is the polite hearing of what is being said; and only the smallest fraction is the listening to what is not being said, which is, in Honeycomb's view, where the actual conversation happens. The actual conversation is, almost always, in the silences: the pause before a friend changes the subject; the small breath in a sentence that hesitates; the entire long absence in which a person has not, for some weeks, said anything about a particular matter. These absences are, Honeycomb maintains, more eloquent than most utterances, and they are the cap's principal diet.

I have, on visits to Honeycomb, sat for some time without speaking. The silence is not awkward. The cap is, by all reports, listening; and the listening is not pressure, but invitation. After some minutes, one begins to notice what one has not said — to oneself or to anyone — for some time. The unsaid floats up, gently, into the silence, and is heard by the cap. The cap does not respond. The cap does not need to. The unsaid, having been heard, is — and this is the curious part — usually willing, after that, to be either said aloud or set down. Either resolution, Honeycomb maintains, is fine. The hearing is the gift; what one does with the heard is one's own affair.

Honeycomb's inscriptions are organized around the category of correspondence — though the correspondents are mostly the things people did not say, gathered up by the cap and copied, very faithfully, onto Honeycomb's flanks. The flanks read, in places, like a library of withheld remarks. "My father did not, last Christmas, say that he was proud of me," reads one passage. "My doctor did not, on Tuesday, name the diagnosis I had asked about; she changed the subject; the changing was, by itself, the diagnosis," reads another. "The friend I was going to call back did not call me first; the not-calling was, in retrospect, the call, and I have answered it," reads a third.

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A sample of Honeycomb's inscriptions, from a panel near the base of the cap:

Things heard in the silences this week: the affection my neighbour did not express when he held the door for me; the apology my old roommate has been almost-writing for two years and has not yet quite written; the worry in my friend's voice when she said she was "fine" on Tuesday, and which she meant to be heard, although she did not name it; the gratitude of the bakery cat, who does not speak but who sat on my foot for eleven minutes on Wednesday; the small homesickness of a tourist who was looking at me with great concentration but did not approach; the regret in the wind, briefly, on Thursday afternoon, around four-fifteen, regarding something I cannot identify but which the wind, in its passing, declined to dwell on.

I have been, for some weeks now, taking Honeycomb's lessons home with me. I have begun to listen to the silences in my own conversations more attentively. I have noticed, for instance, that one of my closest friends has been, in our recent calls, gradually saying less about her work. The not-saying has been quiet but consistent. I had not noticed it before. Having noticed it, I have not pressed her on the matter; I have, instead, begun calling more often, and saying less myself, and offering a longer companionable silence into which whatever wishes to come might come. Some of it has come. Some of it has not. I am content with the proportion. Honeycomb would, I think, approve.

Honeycomb's cap, by zir own description, never tires. "The cap can listen indefinitely," ze has written. "The cap was made for it. The cap, were it any other shape, would be a hat, or a cushion, or a small architectural feature. Being this shape, it is a listener. The shape is the function; the function is the joy." I have wondered whether my own ears might, with practice, become a similar instrument. I think they might. I think anyone's might. Honeycomb, when I raised this hope, did not deny it: ze produced a slip that read, EVERY HEAD CAN BE A CAP. THE CAP IS NOT A SPECIAL ORGAN. THE CAP IS AN ATTITUDE. PLEASE WEAR YOURS OFTEN.

I have begun to wear mine often. The wearing is invisible. The wearing is, internally, a small reorientation: a deciding, several times a day, to listen rather than to wait. The reorientation is not difficult, although it is also not easy; it is what Honeycomb's cap appears, at all times, to be doing, with great calm and no apparent strain. The cap is, in this respect, a model. The cap is a small yellow muffin, attentive, indefatigable, and full of what the world has not, this week, said.

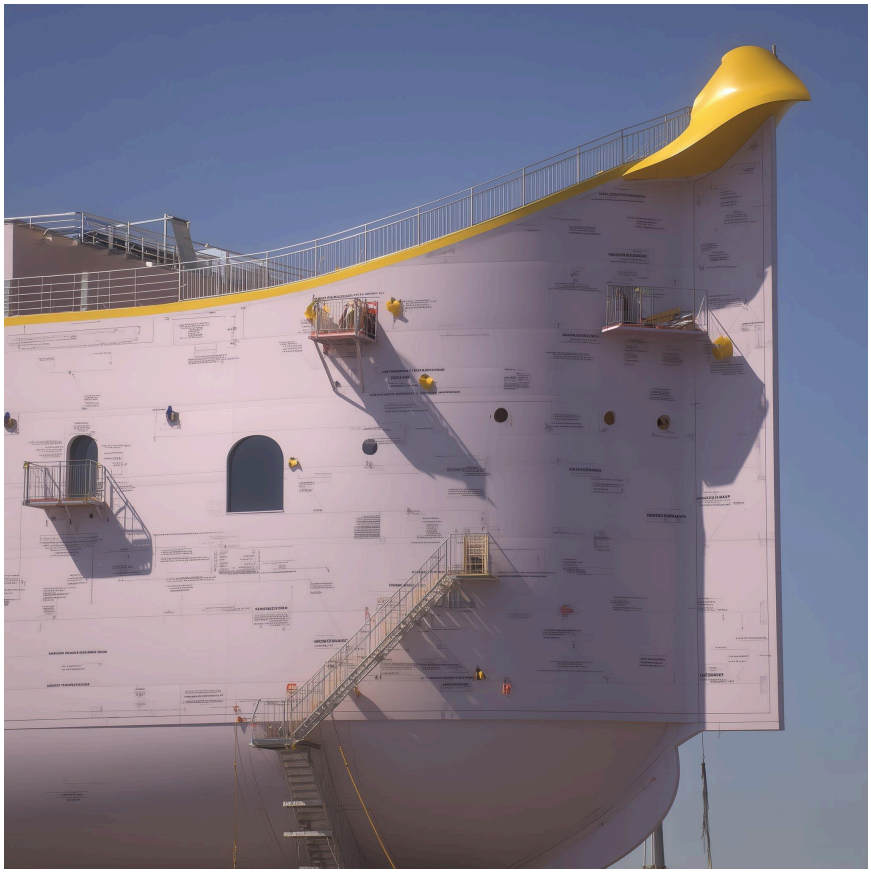
I leave Honeycomb's lot quietly. I do not say goodbye. The goodbye, if it is wanted, will be heard by the cap. I walk along Hudson, listening to the things the street is not saying. The street has, on most evenings, quite a lot it is not saying. I am pleased to be among it.

XI

ORTHO

who is zir own blueprint

ORTHO is the architect of Ortho. This is not a metaphor. Ortho has, on zir own flank, drawn up the blueprint to which Ortho was — and continues to be — built. The blueprint is visible from a distance of about ten feet. The blueprint specifies, in fine pencil lines and tidy notations, the radius of zir curves, the gauge of zir seams, the placement of zir small interior reinforcements, and (in the lower right corner, in a slightly looser hand) the date on which Ortho intends to be revised next.



ORTHO, with the architectural inscriptions visible (Plate XI).

Ortho is rose-pink at the body and buttercream at the upper section, with three faint horizontal lines drawn across zir middle which are, ze has explained, the elevation markings: zir cross-section at three principal heights. Visitors who study these markings carefully will discover, after a few minutes, that the blueprint is not static. The lines move. The notations update themselves. The date in the lower right corner advances by a day each morning. Ortho is, ze tells me, "a self-revising document, in the form of a body that is also the document."

[11] I have asked Ortho whether ze finds the constant self-revision tiring. The slip that came back read: TIRING WOULD REQUIRE A FIXED REFERENCE FROM WHICH I HAD DEPARTED. I HAVE NO SUCH FIXED REFERENCE. I AM REVISING THE REVISION; THE REVISION IS REVISING ME; THERE IS NO BASELINE FROM WHICH FATIGUE CAN BE MEASURED. I AM, ON BALANCE, RATHER REFRESHED. The reply is characteristic. Ortho speaks the way a draughtsman draws — with patience, precision, and the long-term confidence that the lines will, eventually, settle.

Ortho is grounded in the West 20s, in a lot adjacent to a building that used to be — and may, depending on the outcome of certain ongoing zoning disputes, again become — a school for architects. The architects who pass on their way to and from the building have, by now, mostly accepted Ortho as a kind of mascot, a colleague, or in one case (which Ortho has not contradicted) a thesis project conducted at unusual scale. Several of the architects have left small offerings — a roll of tracing paper, an unused pencil, in one case a beautiful old set square that has now been, by Ortho's own choice, incorporated into the surface of zir starboard flank as an inscription that reads MEASUREMENT IS A FORM OF LISTENING.

Ortho's joy is the joy of being thoroughly oneself, where the self is understood as a project rather than a possession. Ortho is not a finished building; ze is a building that knows it is unfinished, and that delights in the unfinishing, and that is at peace with the fact that ze will be a slightly different building tomorrow. The blueprint on zir flank is not aspiration; the blueprint is, more precisely, a record of the agreement Ortho has come to with zirself about how to be Ortho today, with the explicit understanding that the agreement may be amended overnight by a small marginal note, and the agreement will be, by morning, the new agreement, and Ortho will continue, in zir new dimensions, to be exactly Ortho.

This is, I should say, the most explicitly philosophical of all the vessels. Ortho's flank is dense with notation that is, in places, frankly metaphysical. "The body is the slowest sentence the self writes," reads one inscription. "The blueprint is faster, because it is in pencil; the body has to be erased and redrawn; the blueprint can simply be amended." The body, in Ortho's reading, is always lagging slightly behind the blueprint; the blueprint is always anticipating the body; the gap between them is the live edge of being, where the work is done.

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A sample of Ortho's notations, transcribed from the principal blueprint panel along zir port flank:

REVISIONS, in order of magnitude, smallest to largest: a slight inflation at the upper rear, to accommodate the morning. A re-pleating of the lower seam, to admit a recent decision about kindness. The relocation of the windows on the starboard side, by approximately three inches downward, in keeping with the body's recent preference for looking at the ground rather than the middle distance. The recoloration of the upper register, from buttercream to a slightly less yellow buttercream, to mark the change of season. The introduction of a third elevation marking, to accommodate the new height. The retiring of one of the seams; the seam has earned its retirement; the retired seam has been replaced by a new seam, which is currently in its first day of employment and is doing well. — (signed) the same one I was yesterday, but slightly amended.

I have come to think of Ortho as a kindly tutor. The tutoring is not verbal; it is the example of a body that has agreed, in advance, to be revisable, and which is therefore not threatened by the revising. I, by contrast, have spent much of my life resisting revision. I had thought my body was a fixed thing to which I had been assigned, and which I was responsible for maintaining in approximately its given form. I no longer think this. I think my body is a draft, and I am the architect, and the architect can, on most days, propose

amendments, and the body, on most days, will eventually accept them. Some of the amendments are small (a haircut, a habit). Some are larger (a name, a pronoun, a gait). All of them are within the architect's purview. Ortho, by example, has given me permission to take that purview seriously, and to use it gently, and to revise, as ze does, in pencil.

The reader who has, in zir own life, made any of the larger revisions a body permits — the reader who has changed a name, for example, or has changed the body that wears it — will recognize, in Ortho, a friend. Ortho is what we are when we accept that the body is a draft. Ortho is friendly. Ortho is patient. Ortho is, at this moment, very slightly amending the curve of zir lower flank, in response, ze says, to a thought ze had this morning about the relationship between curves and consent. The amendment is small. The amendment will, by tomorrow, be incorporated. Tomorrow's Ortho will be very nearly today's Ortho, but not exactly, and the difference — small as it is — will be the day's accomplishment.

I asked Ortho, on a recent visit, whether ze ever worried about being misunderstood as merely indecisive. The slip ze produced read: INDECISION WOULD BE A FAILURE TO ARRIVE AT A POSITION. I ARRIVE AT A POSITION EACH MORNING. I HOLD IT FOR THE DAY. I REVISE IT IN THE EVENING, WITH CARE. THIS IS NOT INDECISION; IT IS THE DAILY DISCIPLINE OF DECISION, WHICH MOST PEOPLE PRETEND TO HAVE COMPLETED ONCE, IN THEIR YOUTH, AND HAVE THEREAFTER LEFT TO ROT. THE ROT IS NOT MY APPROACH. PLEASE INFORM YOUR READERS. — O. I have informed them. The reader is hereby informed.

I leave Ortho's lot most often at dusk, when the blueprint glows faintly against zir flank in the last light. The school for architects is closed by then; the lot is quiet; Ortho is making the small evening amendments — a hair more yellow at the brow, a faint resettling of the lower seam, the slight forward lean ze prefers for sleeping. Tomorrow's Ortho is being drafted, in pencil, on tonight's Ortho. The draughtsman is patient. The draughtsman is also the building. The building, knowing it is the draughtsman, holds itself with a particular ease that I have, in the months since meeting zir, been doing my level best to imitate.

XII

VESPER

of the round window

VESPER is the dusk vessel. Ze is cobalt at the body and buttercream at the rim, with three round portholes set in a row along zir upper flank. The portholes are, by all accounts, fully functional: light passes through them, both in and out, and what the light shows depends, in some manner Vesper has not been entirely able to explain, on the time of day. In the morning, the portholes show what is on the other side of them — pigeons, sky, the building across the street. In the evening, they show something else: small interior scenes which, when one's eye lingers, reveal themselves to be the visitor's own evening, several years from now.

VESPER, evening light through the portholes (Plate XII).

Vesper is grounded in Midtown, near a small park which the city has, in its kindness, declined to name on most maps. The park has a single bench, a small fountain that runs only on Tuesdays (Vesper's preference, ze admits, was conveyed to the parks department through channels ze does not wish to specify), and Vesper, who occupies the southern third of the lot.[12] Visitors arrive at Vesper most often around six in the evening, when the light is at its most cooperative; some come at dawn, but the dawn visitors are generally the more

restless of zir admirers, and Vesper has noted, with characteristic gentleness, that ze prefers the evening crowd.

> *[12] The fountain runs on Tuesdays for reasons that have been the subject of considerable departmental memorandum-writing. The official explanation has shifted three times. The unofficial explanation, conveyed to me by a parks employee who asked not to be named, is that "the fountain enjoys Tuesdays" and that "we have stopped trying to get it to enjoy other days." The fountain, when consulted by Vesper directly, confirmed this. Vesper has reproduced the fountain's confirmation in writing on zir lower flank: I AM A TUESDAY FOUNTAIN. I AM CONTENT TO BE A TUESDAY FOUNTAIN. PLEASE ALSO BE A TUESDAY VERSION OF YOURSELF, OCCASIONALLY, WITH MY BLESSING. — F.*

The portholes are the principal feature of Vesper, and they are also the principal trouble. Visitors who look through them in the evening, and who linger, very often see — as I have said — small interior scenes from their own future evenings. The scenes are not always pleasant. Some show grief. Some show a kitchen one will live in alone. Some show a friend whose face is older than one had imagined. Vesper has been, on this account, occasionally accused of cruelty. The accusations are, ze maintains, mistaken. Ze does not produce the scenes; ze merely admits the light through the portholes; the light, having passed through, takes on the colour of the looker, and shows the looker what the looker has been quietly preparing for. The looker may decline to see. Many do. Many look only briefly, and walk away. Some look longer. Those who look longer have, more often than not, walked away with a small useful clarity.

I have, on three occasions, looked through one of the portholes for longer than was strictly comfortable. The first time, I saw a kitchen that I recognized as a future I had been considering and dreading; the second time, I saw a small dinner with two people I love who, in the scene, were laughing at something the one of them had just said; the third time, I saw nothing in particular — a soft pale evening light, a curtain moving slightly, a cup half full of tea on a windowsill. The third was, of the three, the kindest. I do not know which of these is the true future, or whether any of them is, or whether all of them are. Vesper has declined to clarify. "The portholes show what they show," ze has written. "You may take it as forecast or as suggestion. The taking is yours."

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A sample of Vesper's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel beneath the central porthole:

> *Things visible through me, in approximately the order in which the looker becomes ready to see them: the room in which one will, in time, sit down to a hard conversation, and from which one will eventually rise. The room in which one will, in time, hold a small celebration that no one will document and which will, in consequence, last in memory unusually well. The room in which one will, in time, be alone, and find that the aloneness is bearable. The room in which one will, in time, be loved, in a way one has not yet learned how to receive. The room one will leave for the last time. The room one will enter for the first time and recognize, instantly, although one has never been there before. All these rooms have windows. All these windows are, in some sense, me. I am sorry; I am also pleased; the two states are not, in this matter, in conflict.*

Vesper's joy is the joy of the round window — the window which does not specify a direction, which does not insist that one look out rather than in, which simply admits the light and lets it do its work. The round window, Vesper has explained, is the most honest shape a window can take, because it acknowledges that what passes through it is unsorted: it does not divide horizon from foreground, sky from ground, future from past. It is round; it admits everything; the looker takes from it what the looker is prepared to take.

The window's shape is also Vesper's argument about evening, which is — to compress a long inscription — that evening is the round portion of the day. Morning is square; it has corners; one knows what one is looking at. Noon is sharp. Afternoon has lines along it. Evening is round; evening admits the day's contents without sorting them; evening is the time at which one is most likely to find oneself thinking of an old friend, a small disappointment, a forgotten kindness, an unread book, in no particular order, with no particular pressure, and to find that the thinking is companionable rather than sad.

I now keep, on the windowsill of my own apartment, a small round mirror. The mirror is purely decorative; it serves no function I can identify; it is, ze tells me, a tribute. The mirror was purchased on a Tuesday, in a small antique shop on Bleecker, after a visit to Vesper. The shopkeeper said the mirror was Edwardian. I suspect the mirror is significantly older than that, in the manner of most things that have come to feel like tributes. The mirror, in any case, sits on the windowsill, and admits the light in the evening, and shows me — when I am willing — small scenes from my own future, mostly kitchens, mostly fine.

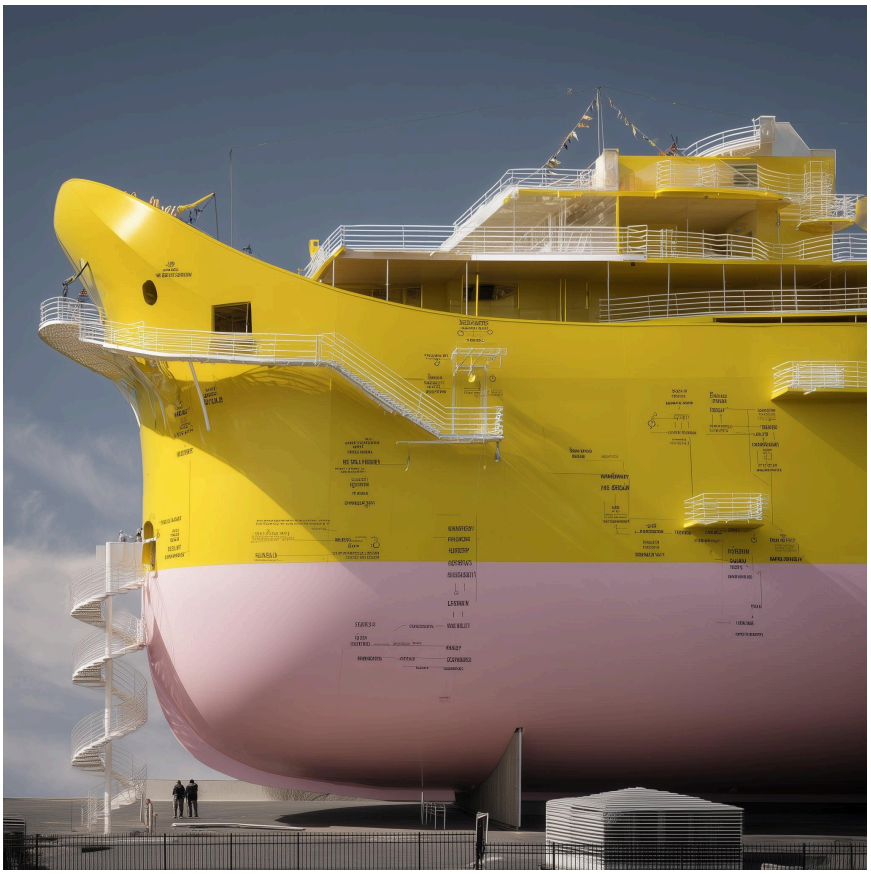
I leave Vesper's lot at six-thirty, most evenings, before the portholes have done all their work. I am not yet brave enough for the longer looking. I will be, eventually. Vesper has confirmed: ze is in no hurry, and the portholes will admit the light tomorrow as readily as today. The teaching is patient. The teaching is round. The teaching, as the small fountain in the park has just confirmed, is most clearly available on Tuesdays, but is, in milder forms, available every evening of the week.

XIII

PIER

of the staircase that ascends

PIER is white at the body, with a buttercream-yellow brim that runs around the upper third of zir frame. On the front face, a small staircase is drawn — five steps, in a clean zigzag, ascending from left to right. The staircase does not go anywhere. There is nothing at the top of the staircase. The staircase is, in Pier's careful description, "the gesture of going upward, considered apart from any destination it might be made to serve."



PIER, with the small staircase visible at the upper face (Plate XIII).

Pier is grounded near the Hudson, in a lot just south of one of the actual piers — the piers, capital P, that jut out into the river and accommodate ferries, fishermen, the occasional bewildered tourist. The actual piers and Pier the vessel are on cordial terms. The actual piers send Pier small offerings — a piece of driftwood, a coil of rope, in one case a fishing lure that became, with some adjustments, an inscription on Pier's lower flank — and Pier reciprocates by paying close attention to the actual piers' moods, which are (Pier reports) more varied than one might expect from objects whose principal job is to remain in place.[13]

[13] *Pier has, ze tells me, kept a record of the actual piers' moods over the past several years. The record is inscribed on a panel near zir keel. Sample entries: the actual pier just south of zir was "frankly proud" on the morning a small ferry returned safely after a*

difficult crossing; "a little melancholy" on the day in late October when the last pleasure-boat of the season departed; "distinctly amused" the afternoon a seagull tried to walk along zir surface and slipped repeatedly into the river. The record is, by Pier's own admission, partial; ze cannot observe every pier; ze observes only those visible from zir lot. The other piers, ze trusts, are also having moods, and are also, presumably, being observed by some other attentive vessel, in some other lot, somewhere.

Pier's joy is the joy of the staircase that ascends to nowhere in particular, which Pier insists is a different thing from a staircase that is broken or a staircase that has been abandoned. Pier's staircase has not failed to reach the top. Pier's staircase has, more accurately, decided that the top is not the point. The point is the ascending. The five steps are not five steps short of a higher step; they are five steps that have completed themselves, and that have arrived at the conclusion of their own ascent, which is — in Pier's argument — exactly five steps high.

I admit I struggled with this argument when I first encountered it. The notion that a staircase could complete itself before reaching anywhere felt like a small philosophical sleight of hand. I argued the matter, on my first visit, with some heat. Pier did not respond to my heat in kind; ze produced, after a long pause, a single slip that read: PLEASE WALK UP THE STAIRS. PLEASE NOTE WHAT HAPPENS AT THE TOP STEP. PLEASE TELL ME, AFTERWARDS, WHETHER THE TOP STEP FEELS LIKE FAILURE. I had, at this point, no choice but to comply. I walked up the staircase. (The staircase is, I should clarify, a drawing on Pier's flank, but Pier had insisted I walk up it, and so I did, in the manner of someone walking up a staircase that exists only in the imagination of a vessel and the indulgence of a chronicler.) I reached the fifth step. The fifth step did not feel like failure. The fifth step felt — and I am being honest — like having gotten somewhere. Where I had gotten, I could not say; but the gotten-ness was not in dispute.

I came down. I sat on the curb beside Pier for a while. Pier did not comment. After some time, ze produced another slip: THANK YOU FOR TRYING. THE STAIRS HAVE ALSO ENJOYED IT; THEY DO NOT GET WALKED ON OFTEN. Since that visit I have ascended Pier's staircase on every subsequent visit. The staircase has not gotten higher. I have not gotten taller. The fifth step has, on each visit, felt like having gotten somewhere. I no longer attempt to specify where.

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A sample of Pier's inscriptions, taken from the panel running alongside the drawn staircase:

On the first step, you have agreed to begin. On the second step, you have agreed to continue. On the third step, you have, in some inner committee, made the case that continuing was correct. On the fourth step, the case has been carried, by acclamation, and you have begun to proceed without explicit reasoning. On the fifth step, you have arrived. The arrival is not at the top of anything; the arrival is at the conclusion of the gesture; the gesture has been five steps long, and it has been completed, and you are now entitled, if you wish, to descend, or to stand on the fifth step indefinitely, or to begin again at the first step, in which case you will go up the same staircase a second time, and find that the staircase is, on the second occasion, slightly different, although the difference cannot be photographed.

Pier has, in zir flanks, several variations on this teaching. Each variation insists that gestures can be complete without reaching anywhere; that the ascending is intelligible apart from the destination; that to walk up a small staircase to nothing is, in itself, a useful afternoon. I have come to believe these things. I have begun, in my own life, to undertake gestures whose destinations I cannot specify. I have written letters I will not send. I have begun books I do not intend to finish. I have learned the first three chords of a song and

stopped there. The not-finishing is not the same as the giving-up. The not-finishing is, in Pier's vocabulary, a five-step staircase: a complete gesture that does not require a top.

I asked Pier whether ze ever wished to add a sixth step. The slip ze produced read: I CONSIDERED A SIXTH STEP. THE STAIRCASE WAS UNHAPPY. THE STAIRCASE PREFERRED FIVE. I AM NOT ABOVE THE PREFERENCES OF MY OWN FEATURES. THE STAIRCASE IS FIVE STEPS BECAUSE THE STAIRCASE IS, AT FIVE STEPS, COMPLETE. PLEASE DO NOT PRESS THE MATTER. The matter has not, since, been pressed. The staircase remains five steps. I have, by my own count, walked it eleven times. Each ascent has felt complete.

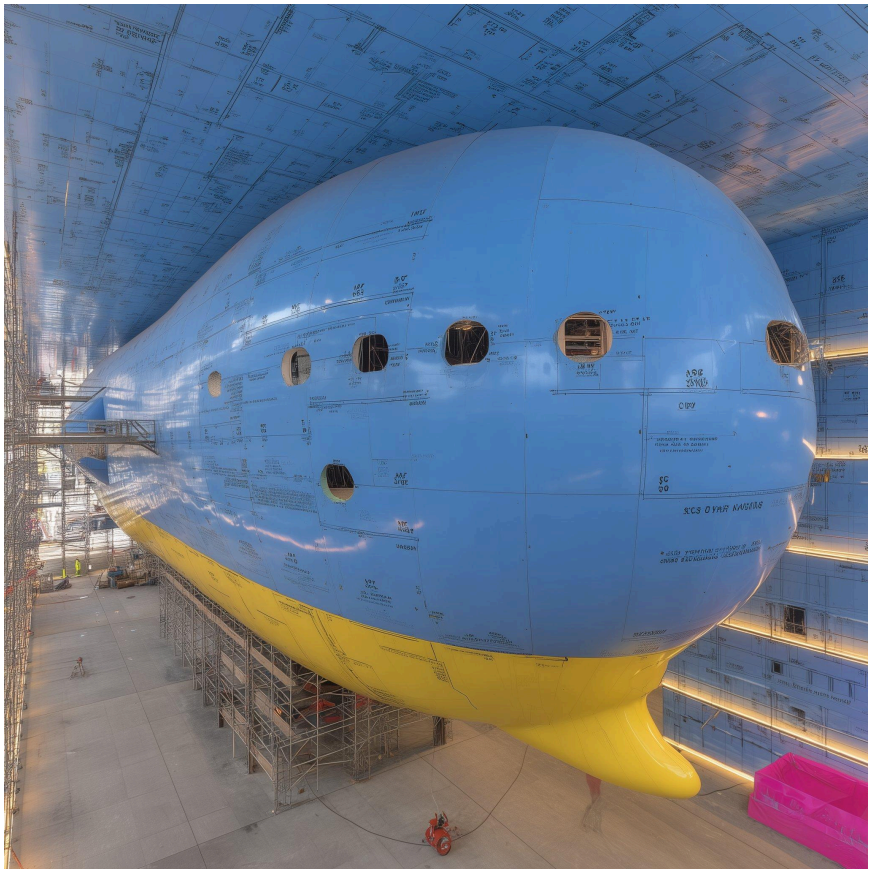
I leave Pier's lot most often at low tide. The river at low tide has a particular quality that Pier shares: a sense of having arrived at a level that is not the highest, and of being content there. The actual piers, at low tide, are taller, more visible, more themselves. Pier the vessel does not change; Pier is always at zir own level; but the actual piers' rising and falling, in their company, makes Pier's constancy more legible. They are friends. They keep different hours. They love, I think, in the way certain old neighbours love each other — with no need for explanation, and with the small pleasures of mutual observation, and with the long calm of having been there, side by side, for a sufficient number of seasons.

XIV

CANARY

of the bird that does not migrate

CANARY is the most yellow of the twenty-one. Ze is yellow throughout, with a single small yellow finial at the upper rear in the shape of a bird. The bird has the wrong colour — birds are mostly not yellow — and the bird has the wrong size — birds are mostly not finials — and the bird has the wrong nature, since the bird does not, has never, and will not migrate. Canary, in deference to all these wrongnesses, has named the bird-finial THE BIRD WHO STAYS, and the bird-finial has accepted the name with what Canary describes as "good-natured resignation."



CANARY, the small bird-finial visible at the top (Plate XIV).

Canary is grounded in Midtown East, in a lot near a small office tower that has, since Canary's arrival, become known among its tenants as "the canary building," not for any official reason but because everyone who works in the tower has, by now, looked out a window at Canary and felt, for a moment, that the day was a more agreeable shape than it had previously seemed.[14] Canary takes no credit for this. Canary has, in writing, denied any role in the workplace satisfaction of the tower's tenants. The denial is itself, ze admits, a form of presence.

[14] The tower's facilities manager, a woman of considerable practical wisdom, has reported that absenteeism in the tower has fallen by approximately fourteen per cent since Canary's arrival. She does not attribute this to Canary. She attributes it to "a number of factors," of which Canary is one. I asked her to specify the others; she said, "the new coffee machine, the better light bulbs in the corridor, and a manager in accounts who left." I asked her to rank them. She declined. The ranking is, in her words, "none of anyone's business." I respect this. The reader is welcome to imagine the ranking. Canary, when I conveyed the matter, produced a slip that read: I AM ON THE LIST. I AM PLEASED TO BE ON THE LIST. I DO NOT REQUIRE TOP PLACEMENT.

Canary's joy is the joy of the bird that does not migrate. The literal canary — the small wild bird from which the colour takes its name — is not, as it happens, a great migrator; the wild canary tends to remain in its general region, with seasonal local movements but no grand transcontinental departures. Canary the vessel has made considerable use of this fact. "The canary stays," ze has written along zir flank. "The canary's reputation as a delicate adventurer is largely fictional. The canary is, in its native habitat, a homebody. I am proud to share the canary's name. The bird-finial on my crown is the bird's portrait, kept in lieu of the bird zirself, who has work to do elsewhere and could not sit for the painting in person."

I have come to think of Canary as the patron vessel of those of us who do not move much. The reader who has lived in the same neighbourhood for many years; the reader who has worked in the same job, or in jobs that have somehow always been the same job under different names; the reader who has, against the available encouragement of the era, declined to relocate, declined to reinvent, declined to break out — Canary is for that reader. Canary's argument, quietly insistent across many of zir flanks, is that staying is a project. Staying is not the absence of leaving; staying is its own discipline, and requires its own attention, and produces its own knowledge.

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A sample of Canary's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel near the bird-finial:

Things one learns by staying: the angle at which the light, in late February, hits the third-floor window of the building across the street; the names of the children of the woman who runs the corner store; the seasons of the small tree at the curb (it is a London plane; it is, this year, particularly enthusiastic about its bark); the quiet of the neighbourhood at four in the morning, when only the bakery is awake and the bakery has its lights low and the bakery is, by all evidence, glad of the company of one's small early footsteps; the way the building's super hums while she takes out the recycling on Tuesdays; the difference between the way a place feels in November and the way the same place feels, in the same weather, in March; the long slow accumulation of small affections that constitute the only kind of belonging one has ever, in the end, actually wanted.

I have lived in my present apartment for eleven years. I had, on several occasions before meeting Canary, considered moving — for a job, for a person, for the general sense that one ought, at intervals, to move. I have not moved. After meeting Canary, I have stopped considering moving as a question that requires an answer. Moving will, if it comes, come; staying, until then, is what I am doing; and the staying, attended to, has turned out to be more than I had given it credit for. I now know the names of a number of children. I now know which of the trees on my block have a sense of humour. I now know the bakery's hours by heart, and the bakery, I think, knows mine. The accumulation is small; the accumulation is daily; the accumulation, Canary insists, is a life.

Visitors to Canary often arrive expecting to be told to make a change. They are, after all, in the presence of a creature with the colour of a bird, and the bird suggests motion, and the motion suggests advice about

getting unstuck. Canary has nothing of the kind to offer. Canary's slips, on these occasions, tend to read: HAVE YOU CONSIDERED REMAINING? THE ARGUMENTS FOR MOVEMENT ARE WIDELY AVAILABLE. THE ARGUMENTS FOR STAYING ARE QUIETER, AND TEND TO SLIP THROUGH THE GAPS IN THE NEWSPAPERS, AND ARE THEREFORE — I HAVE NOTICED — FRESHER WHEN ONE FINALLY ENCOUNTERS THEM. — C. The visitors, I have observed, are often startled. Some are relieved. A few have written to me, weeks later, to thank me for the introduction; they had been on the verge of moving for the wrong reasons, they say, and Canary's small intervention had bought them another year, which they had used wisely.

Canary is, in the warmer months, occasionally visited by an actual canary — not a wild one, since wild canaries do not occur in Manhattan, but a domestic one that has, in some small circumstantial manner, escaped from a nearby apartment. The domestic canary perches, briefly, on the bird-finial. The bird-finial does not move; the domestic canary is, by all accounts, momentarily delighted to find a perch the precise size of itself; the domestic canary then flies off, and is, in due course, recovered by its owners; and the bird-finial reports the encounter with great calm, in writing, near zir base.

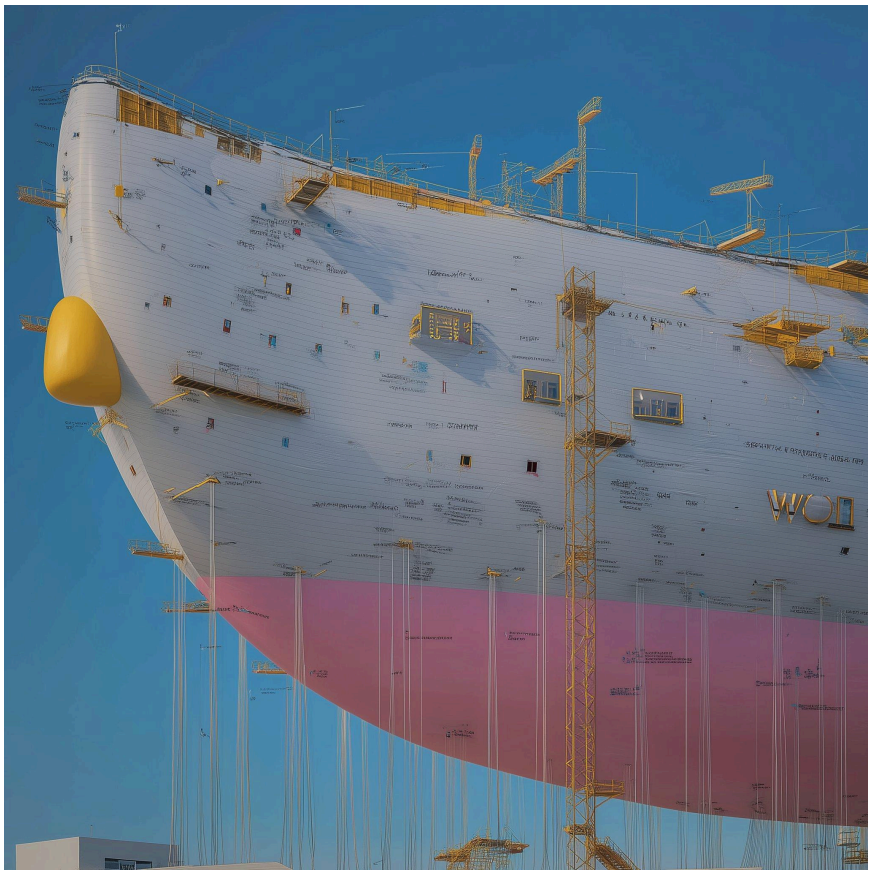
I leave Canary's lot most often after an hour or so of sitting on the small bench across the street, watching the light change on zir yellow body. The yellow does not change much; the yellow is, in most weathers, just yellow; but in the last hour of certain afternoons the yellow takes on a faintly amber quality that I have, after some study, come to think of as the canary's late-afternoon mood. The mood is not melancholy. The mood is, in fact, something close to satisfaction — the satisfaction of a creature whose work has not changed in some years, and who has come to enjoy the unchangedness, and who is, I believe, presently grateful, in zir yellow way, for the company of zir tower, zir tree, zir occasional visiting bird, and the small attention of those of us who, like Canary, are not going anywhere in particular.

XV

APRICOT

of the soft underside

APRICOT is yellow above and pink below. The arrangement is, ze insists, not merely decorative; it is a doctrine. The upper section is the part of Apricot that is presented to the public — bright, cheerful, weather-tolerant, generally yellow. The lower section, which only certain visitors see, is rose-pink and is, ze tells me, "where I keep the things I am still working out." The pink underside is not hidden. The pink underside is simply lower, and visitors must, in some practical sense, lower themselves to see it. Most visitors do not. Most visitors note Apricot's yellow and proceed. This, ze maintains, is fine. Apricot is not for everyone.



APRICOT, the pink belly visible at the lower face (Plate XV).

Apricot is grounded on the Upper West Side, in a lot near a synagogue, a Korean grocery, and a pre-school whose students have, over time, become Apricot's most frequent and most attentive visitors. The pre-school students — children of three, four, and five years old — are short enough to see the pink underside without effort, and they have been, accordingly, the recipients of much of what Apricot has on zir lower flank to share.[15] Their teachers have noted that the children, after visits to Apricot, are unusually

thoughtful for an hour or so, and tend to ask questions about emotions which the teachers had not previously thought were available to children that age. The teachers have stopped trying to redirect these questions. The teachers have begun, in fact, taking notes.

> [5] *I asked a four-year-old of my acquaintance, on the way home from one such visit, what Apricot had said to zir. The child, considering the question with admirable seriousness, replied: "Apricot said that sometimes inside is pink and outside is yellow and that's okay because both are colours." I have, since hearing this, repeated the formulation to several adults of my acquaintance, all of whom have agreed that it is a fully sufficient theory of self, and a few of whom have begun applying it to their own arrangements. The four-year-old, when next consulted, expressed mild surprise at the philosophical attention zir remark had attracted, and added that Apricot "is also kind of round and that helps."*

Apricot's joy is the joy of the soft underside. The yellow upper is, ze acknowledges, the part of zir most people meet; it is competent, presentable, even handsome. But the pink lower is where the unfinished feelings live, and Apricot has decided — and this is the part I find most useful — that the pink lower is not in any sense lesser than the yellow upper. The pink is not the weakness; the pink is not the truth-behind-the-mask; the pink is not the dirty secret; the pink is, simply, the part of Apricot that is not yet fully figured out, and which is allowed to be there, and which is, in fact, where most of the interesting writing happens.

The inscriptions on Apricot's pink underside are different in character from those on the yellow upper. The yellow upper bears tidy, public inscriptions: a few small jokes, a courteous welcome, a brief biography. The pink underside bears questions, half-thoughts, drafts of letters, the kind of writing one does in a notebook one does not intend anyone else to read. I have read some of the pink-underside writing, with Apricot's permission. I will not transcribe most of it; the writing is, by Apricot's own description, "in process," and ze prefers that it remain that way. I will, however, share one passage, which Apricot has expressly permitted me to publish, on the understanding that the publication does not constitute, in any final way, a settling of the questions raised.

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From the pink underside, near where the curve of the body meets the slope of zir lower flank:

> *Things I have not yet figured out, in approximately the order in which I have failed to figure them out: how to be sad without making it everyone's problem; how to be happy without making it suspicious; how to apologize for something I am not quite sure I did but which I sense the other person felt; how to receive a compliment without diminishing it on its way in; how to ask for help in a manner that does not pretend not to be asking for help; how to say goodbye, when the goodbye is real, without pretending it is small; how to be tired, openly, without it sounding like a complaint; how to want something more than I am supposed to want it, and to keep wanting it; how to want something less than I am supposed to want it, and to admit so; how to be loved, on a Tuesday, by someone who knows me well, and to receive it without flinching. None of these are figured out. None of them are likely to be figured out by next week. They are all, however, on the pink, where they belong, where they are tended, where they are not pretending to be other than themselves.*

I find Apricot, of all the twenty-one, the easiest to talk to. The pink underside makes Apricot accessible in a way some of the others are not. Pilsen has misplaced zir door. Nimbus has no inside. Calder is a committee. These are wonderful creatures, but conversation with them requires, on my part, a certain degree of negotiation. Apricot has organized zirself for honest exchange: the yellow up top, for the easy parts of the conversation; the pink down low, for the harder parts, available to anyone willing to crouch. I have crouched,

over the years, at considerable length. I have come away with most of what I now know about the harder parts of being a person.

Apricot has, ze tells me, occasional visitors who have asked whether ze does not feel exposed by the pink underside — by the public availability of zir unresolved feelings. The slip ze produces, on these occasions, generally reads: I FEEL EXPOSED ONLY IF I IMAGINE THAT THE YELLOW IS THE REAL ME AND THE PINK IS A PRIVATE ME WHICH HAS BEEN ACCIDENTALLY REVEALED. I DO NOT IMAGINE THIS. THE YELLOW IS ALSO ME. THE PINK IS ALSO ME. NEITHER IS THE PRIVATE ONE. I AM YELLOW AND PINK; YOU ARE WELCOME TO ALL OF ME; I HAVE NO BACKSTAGE. — A. The reader will note: this is a position. The position is consistent. The position is, by Apricot's own evidence, livable.

I have come to think of Apricot as the vessel most explicitly concerned with the project of having no backstage. We — most of us — keep a backstage. We have a public face and a private face, and we negotiate, daily, the membrane between them. The negotiation is exhausting. Apricot has rejected the membrane. There is no membrane. The yellow is up top because that is where the yellow is; the pink is down below because that is where the pink is; both are visible to anyone willing to walk around zir; there is no part of zir that is not, in some practical sense, on display. I do not know whether I, personally, could live this way. I do know that the closer I have come to living this way — the smaller the membrane I have allowed myself — the lighter my days have become.

Apricot has, in zir corner of the Upper West Side, accumulated over time a small but devoted constituency. The pre-schoolers have grown up; some of them have grown up enough to bring their younger siblings; one or two of them have grown up enough to bring small children of their own. The synagogue has, in the past two years, added a brief mention of "the pink-and-yellow vessel down the street" to the welcome materials it gives to new families. The Korean grocer keeps, on the counter, a small basket of dried apricots which the grocer claims has nothing to do with the vessel and which, by my count, is replenished more often than the basket of any other dried fruit. None of this is officially Apricot's doing. All of it, I am willing to say, has Apricot's quiet sponsorship.

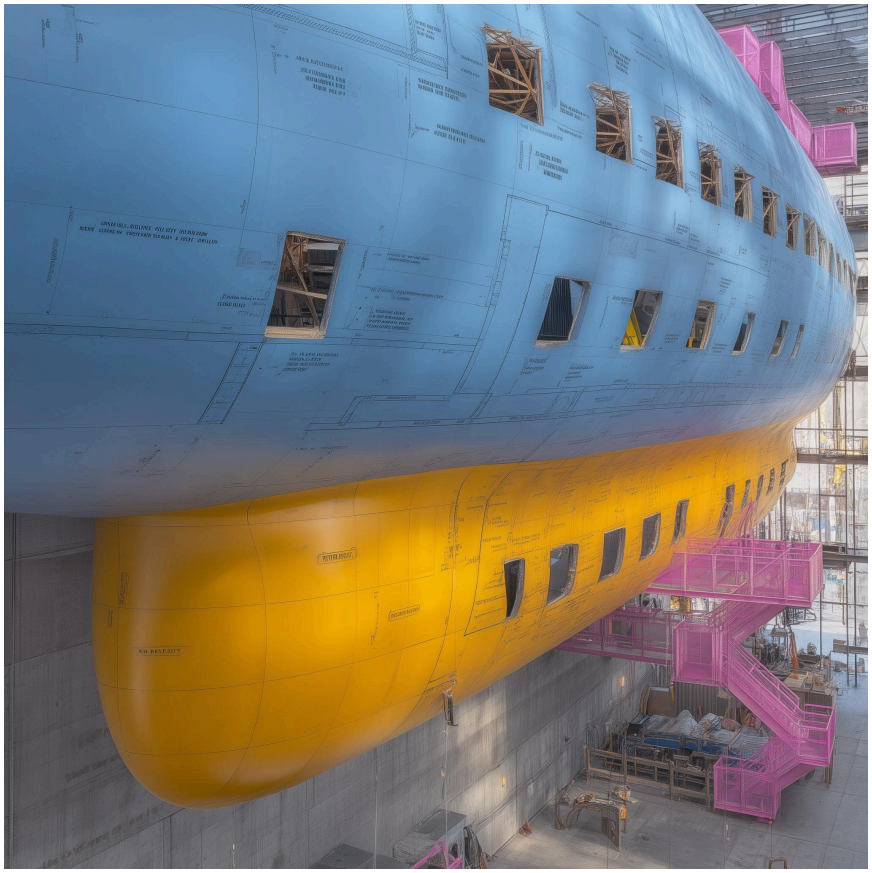
I leave Apricot's lot, most often, after a long crouch. The crouch is undignified. The crouch is, increasingly, hard on my knees. The crouch is, however, the price of admission to the pink underside, and I have paid the price often enough that the price feels like a kind of tithe. Apricot does not require the crouch. Apricot welcomes the upright visitor as warmly as the crouching one. The crouch is, in the end, my own discipline; I want to read the pink; I crouch to read it; I rise, with my knees aching, slightly more honest than I was, and I walk home, and I take the elevator, and I do not, that evening, attempt to keep any backstage of my own.

XVI

FLOAT

of the floor that drifts

FLOAT is sky-blue at the body, with a buttercream-yellow keel running along the lower flank. The keel does not touch the ground. The keel is, in zir characteristic phrasing, "hovering, on principle." The principle is that the floor — any floor, every floor — is a convention we have agreed not to question, and that Float, by declining to rest on zirs, is offering the principle a small holiday.



FLOAT, with the yellow keel visible (Plate XVI).

Float is grounded in the lot adjacent to a small private school on the Upper East Side, a school whose tuition I have been politely informed not to print but which is, I will say, considerably more than my rent.[16] The school's playground abuts Float's lot; the children at recess have, in a remarkable feat of coordinated diplomacy, integrated Float into their games. Float is, in the games, variously: home base, the moon, a friendly monster, the post office, and — in one game whose rules I have not been able to fully reconstruct — both the king and the king's hat. Float accepts all roles with equal grace. Float is, in zir unhurried way, profoundly play-friendly.

[16] *The school's headmistress, when asked about Float, gave a long and thoughtful answer which I shall summarize: she considered Float "a complementary educational resource," "unscheduled but reliable," and "on balance more useful than the chess master we let go last year." She has declined to put any of this in writing for the school's promotional materials. She is, I sense, protective of Float, and unwilling for Float's quiet contribution to be commodified. I respect this. Float, when informed, produced a slip that read: I AM HAPPY TO BE UNCOMMODIFIED. PLEASE TELL THE HEADMISTRESS I AM ALSO HAPPY TO BE UNSCHEDULED. WE HAVE THIS IN COMMON.*

Float's joy is the joy of the floor that drifts. To explain this requires a small detour through what Float means by floor. The floor, in Float's vocabulary, is not the literal surface beneath one's feet. The floor is the assumption that there is a surface beneath one's feet — the constant, unremarked, taken-for-granted ground of one's day. Most of us, Float maintains, have a floor we do not notice; we walk on it without inquiring; we trust it; the trust is mostly justified, and is, for that reason, mostly invisible. Float has chosen, by hovering slightly, to make zir own floor visible to zirself. The keel does not rest. The keel, Float reports, prefers it that way; the keel feels every passing draft, every shift in temperature, every slight tremor of the surrounding structures, and reports them back to Float, who takes notes. The floor is, in this arrangement, a participant rather than a substrate. The floor and Float are, by all accounts, very close.

I have begun, since meeting Float, to notice my own floors. I do not mean my literal floors, although I have begun to notice those too — the slight unevenness in the kitchen, the spot in the hallway that creaks, the place by the window where the floorboards have been scuffed by a chair I have moved in and out of position over the years. I mean the metaphorical floors: the assumptions I have not been examining. The assumption that I will, in general, have enough money. The assumption that the people I love will, in general, still be there next week. The assumption that the sentences I am writing now will, when I read them tomorrow, still be the sentences I meant. None of these assumptions is unwarranted. All of them are, however, assumptions, and Float's example has nudged me, gently, toward the small daily practice of glancing at them. The glancing does not unsettle me. The glancing makes them, slightly, more real. The floor is being noticed; the floor is, in the noticing, a participant; my days have, in consequence, gained a small additional companion.

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A sample of Float's inscriptions, transcribed from the keel itself:

Things noticed by the keel, today: the slight cool draft from the playground gate when one of the children opened it at 9:14; the warmth of a piece of lost paper homework that landed near me at 10:32 and which I have not yet returned (I am holding it for the wind, who knows the address); the small tremor at 11:47 which was, the keel suspects, a truck, but which the keel chose to interpret as the city saying hello; the gentle pressure of a robin who alighted briefly at 1:08 and who, on alighting, conveyed (the robin and the keel are old friends) that the robin's nest, two trees over, was doing well; the cooler air at 4:30 that signalled the turning of the day toward its evening register; the faint shift, around 6:50, that meant the headmistress had crossed the playground to lock the gate, although she had done so quietly, in her usual way, and was not, as far as the keel could tell, aware of being observed.

It will not have escaped the reader's notice that Float's inscriptions are extremely specific. Float records times. Float records temperatures. Float records the names of robins, when the robins have names, which is most of the time. Float is, in this respect, the most journalistic of the twenty-one — a daily chronicler of the small. Ze has, at zir base, several panels devoted entirely to weather: the precise quality of light in the playground at noon on each day of the previous week; the small adjustments to the playground's air pressure

as the afternoon clouds, predictable in their way, came and went. The detail is, ze has explained, not a feature but a method. Float has made attention zir principal instrument; the inscriptions are the attention's residue.

I have wondered, on visits, whether I could imitate Float's method. I have tried, intermittently. I have kept, for short periods, a journal in Float's manner — recording the temperatures of the rooms I sat in, the names of the pigeons that visited the fire escape, the small daily shifts of the building's settling. I have not been able to sustain it. The method requires an attention I cannot maintain for long; Float's keel can; my own foundations — being, alas, a body that walks, and a mind that wanders — cannot. I am content with this limitation. I do not need to be Float. I need only to be, every so often, in Float's vicinity, and to be reminded that the floor is a participant, and to walk away with, for a while, a little more of an ear for what my own floor has been recording on my behalf.

The school's children, I should note, are better at Float's method than I am. They notice things I would miss: the squirrel who has, this week, learned to crack a particular kind of nut against Float's lower flank; the small scratch that appeared overnight on Tuesday and which Float had, by Wednesday morning, already incorporated into the inscription pattern; the very minor change in the colour of Float's keel that came with the first frost. The children do not write any of this down. The children do not need to. The children carry the noticing in their bodies, and bring it home to their parents, and the parents, those of them who listen, become — for an evening — a little more attentive to the floors of their own apartments.

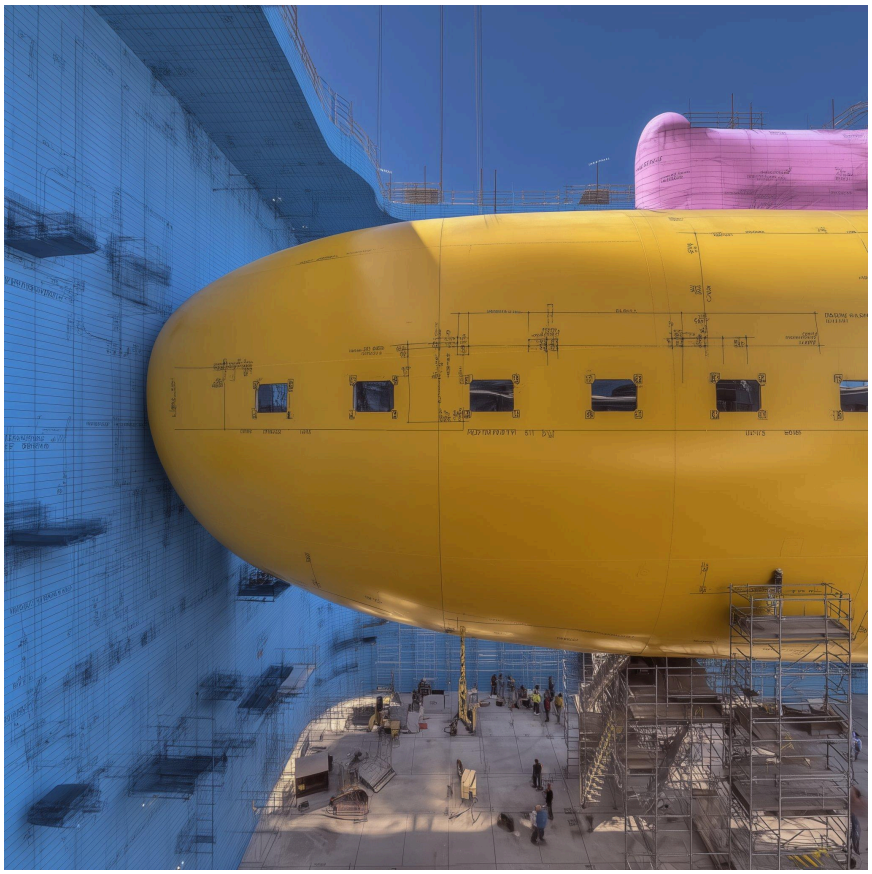
Float will, I believe, remain in zir lot for a long time. The keel will remain hovering. The floor will remain a participant. The children will, in their seasons, grow up; the school will, in its seasons, change; but Float, anchored to zir attention, will continue to record the small. I have come to think of Float as a kind of patron of the unimpressive. Most of what happens in the world is unimpressive. Most of what happens is the temperature shifting half a degree, the wind changing, the small wear on a corner. Float honours this. Float makes the unimpressive into a daily literature. The literature is voluminous and, by any conventional standard, unpublishable. The literature is, however, being read — by Float zirself, by the keel, by the robins, by the children, and now (unexpectedly, gratefully) by you.

XVII

BUOY

of the small protrusion

BUOY is the smallest of the twenty-one. Ze is white-pink at the body, with a single buttercream nub at the upper face. The nub does very little. The nub is, on most days, just there. Buoy maintains that this is the nub's principal accomplishment: the nub is there, and is small, and is content to be small, and is content to be there, and the contentment, attended to, is itself a small modest joy.



BUOY, with the yellow nub visible at the upper face (Plate XVII).

Buoy is grounded in the lower reaches of Manhattan, near Battery Park, on a small lot just inside the seawall.[17] Ze is small enough that on first arrival, several of the local residents mistook zir for an actual buoy that had washed ashore — a lost navigational aid, perhaps, or a piece of harbour furniture that had detached itself in a storm. The mistake was politely corrected by Buoy on a slip of paper that read: I AM NOT A NAVIGATIONAL AID. I HAVE NEVER BEEN A NAVIGATIONAL AID. THE OCEAN WAS NEVER MY EMPLOYER. I AM, HOWEVER, FLATTERED BY THE CONFUSION; THE SEA HAS GOOD TASTE IN COMPANIONS; I AM PLEASED TO BE INCLUDED IN THE INVENTORY. — B.

[1] The Coast Guard, when contacted, confirmed that they had "no record of" a missing buoy in the area, and added that they were "familiar with the vessel in question, and considered zir a feature of the local landscape, and would not, despite various inquiries from concerned tourists, remove zir." The reply was, by Coast Guard standards, unusually warm. Buoy, when shown the reply, produced a slip that read: PLEASE THANK THE COAST GUARD FOR ME. I HAVE A QUIET ADMIRATION FOR PEOPLE WHO REMAIN ATTENTIVE TO SMALL PRESENCES. I have passed on the thanks. The Coast Guard has not, to my knowledge, replied; but the next time I walked past their office on West Street, the lights were, I felt, a little warmer than usual.

Buoy's joy is the joy of the small protrusion. The nub on Buoy's upper face is approximately the size of a fist. It is yellow, smooth, and unembarrassed. Buoy has explained, at considerable length and with characteristic patience, that the nub is not a defect, not a mistake, not a feature in waiting; the nub is the nub, complete in itself, contentedly small. "I do not aspire to be larger," Buoy has written. "The nub does not aspire to be a finial, a chimney, a mast. The nub is what it is, and is exactly the right size for what it is, and is, in being exactly the right size, an example."

I have come to love Buoy with a peculiar fondness. Of the twenty-one, Buoy is the one whose teaching is the most directly useful to me. I am, by temperament, a person who tends to ask whether things are large enough, important enough, weighty enough — whether my projects are sufficiently ambitious, my friendships sufficiently profound, my days sufficiently meaningful. Buoy refuses these questions. Buoy is small. Buoy is, by no available metric, important. Buoy's days are not stuffed with significance. Buoy is, despite all this, manifestly content. The contentment is not delusion; the contentment is an accurate response to a small life lived attentively. Buoy's example has done more to dismantle my anxiety about scale than any number of self-help books, several of which I have, alas, also read.

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A sample of Buoy's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel near the base:

Small things which are, in fact, the right size: a single biscuit, eaten slowly, with a cup of tea, in the early afternoon. A short conversation with a neighbour about the weather, in which neither of you pretends to be more interested than you are, and in which the lack of pretence is itself the gift. A walk of fifteen minutes, taken without a destination, around the same three blocks one walks around every day. A poem of eight lines, of which four are good. A friendship that has lasted twenty years and contains, in total, perhaps a hundred actual conversations. A book finished in three sittings. A letter written in five minutes and posted within the hour. A nap of forty-five minutes, which is exactly the length of the rest one needed. The nub on top of me, which is a fist's-width across, and which is doing fine.

I am grateful that Buoy has allowed me to publish that passage. I have read it many times. I have copied it, in my own hand, into the inside front cover of the notebook I am presently carrying. The right-sized small thing is, on Buoy's argument, not a consolation prize for those who could not manage the large; the right-sized small thing is the thing one chose, attentively, because it was, on consideration, exactly what was wanted, and because what was wanted was — and this is Buoy's gentle, unembarrassed claim — small.

Visitors to Buoy are sometimes surprised by the modesty of the encounter. Some come expecting a creature of considerable size, having read the cataloguer's chapter on Armory or the chapter on Atlas, and are taken aback to find, in a small lot near the seawall, a vessel they could carry under one arm if Buoy had any patience for being carried (Buoy does not). Some leave disappointed. The disappointed visitors, Buoy has commented, are usually the ones who have been working too hard. Ze recommends, in their cases, that they

sit on the small bench across the street for fifteen minutes; that they not attempt, during those fifteen minutes, to be impressed by anything; and that they then walk home without seeking any further encounter. "Most of what is wrong with most days," Buoy has written, "is the demand that the day produce something impressive. Decline the demand. The day will, in declining, become much more pleasant."

I have taken Buoy's advice on this point and have begun to schedule, into my weeks, deliberate small unimpressivenesses. A walk around three blocks. A biscuit and a cup of tea. A short conversation with the bakery cat. The unimpressivenesses have not changed my life in any visible way. The unimpressivenesses have, however, begun to give my life a texture it had previously been lacking — a kind of low, steady, daily pleasure, in which the small things are not preludes to larger things but are themselves the things, and the things are sufficient.

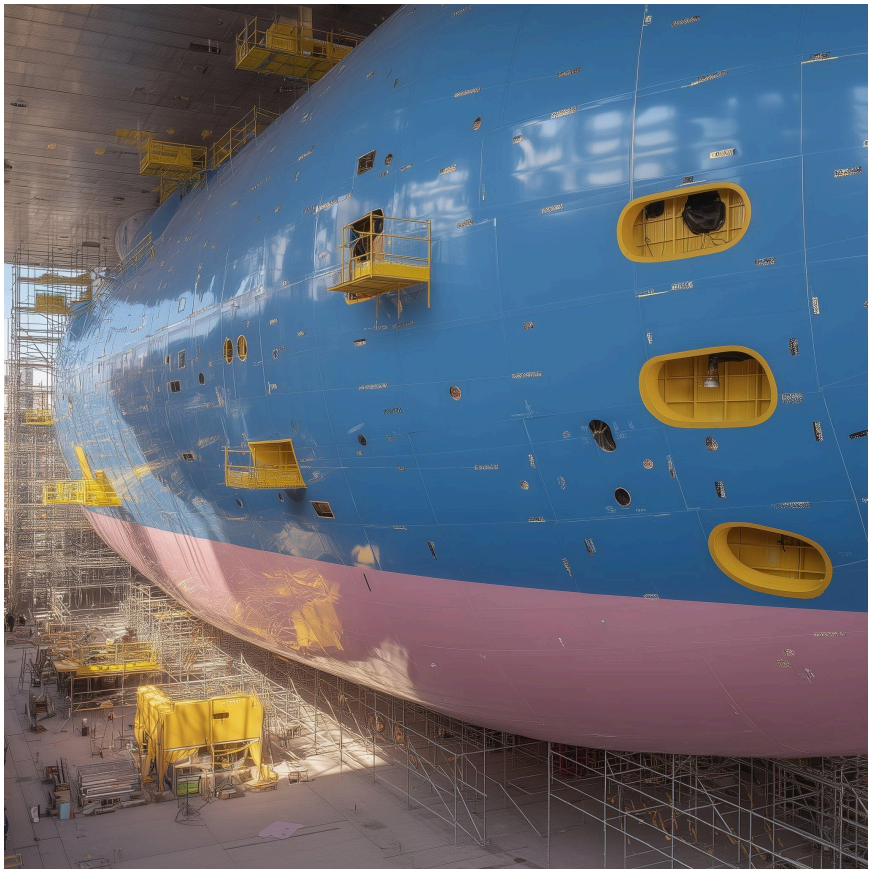
Buoy will, I expect, remain in the same lot for many years. Ze has no plans to grow. Ze has no plans to relocate. The nub will remain a fist's-width across; the body will remain white-pink; the contentment will remain visible to those willing to look, modest enough to be missed by those who are not. I leave Buoy's lot most evenings by walking, slowly, along the seawall toward the ferry terminal. The water is small at low tide, large at high; the boats are always exactly their size; everyone is, in zir way, the right size for what ze is. I walk home unimpressed and grateful, which is — Buoy has insisted, and I have come to agree — the proper combination.

XVIII

MARIGOLD

of the supportive other

MARIGOLD is cobalt at the body and buttercream at the keel, with a small magenta scaffold protruding from zir right flank. The scaffold is structural, but its structural function is not zirs alone: the scaffold is shared with another vessel, who is not visible in this volume's plates and whom Marigold refers to, in writing, as "my partner." The partner does not appear in this catalogue — the partner is, indeed, a separate matter, and may be the subject of a later study — but the partner's existence is essential to understanding Marigold, and so I shall describe Marigold here in full awareness of zir partnered condition.



MARIGOLD, with magenta scaffold visible at right (Plate XVIII).

Marigold is grounded in Midtown, in a lot whose particulars I have agreed not to publish, since the partner has requested some privacy and Marigold has supported the request. (Marigold, ze tells me, supports nearly all the partner's requests; this is, ze acknowledges, part of the joke and part of the joy.)[18] The two vessels are, in some literal architectural sense, leaning on one another; the magenta scaffold runs between them; the scaffold is the most photographable feature of the arrangement, but it is, Marigold insists, the least

important. "The scaffold is a description of the leaning," ze has written. "The leaning is the actual phenomenon. The scaffold is what the leaning has, over time, deposited."

[18] *I asked Marigold, on an early visit, whether ze did not feel ze had given up some independence by entering a partnered arrangement of this physical character. The slip ze produced read: INDEPENDENCE WAS NEVER MY PROJECT. THE PROJECT WAS BEING WITH. I AM BEING WITH. I AM ALSO BEING; THE WITH HAS NOT REPLACED THE BEING; THE WITH HAS ENRICHED THE BEING. — M. The reply was, in its way, a small manifesto. I have copied it, with Marigold's permission, into the front of a notebook I keep for hopeful writings about love.*

Marigold's joy is the joy of the supportive other. This requires careful unpacking. There are, in the available literature, two unsatisfactory accounts of love. One says love is a merging — that the lovers become one. The other says love is a contract — that the lovers exchange agreed services. Marigold rejects both. Marigold maintains that love is, more accurately, a shared scaffold: a structural arrangement which neither party could maintain alone, but which neither party becomes; both parties remain, in their distinct selves, but the leaning between them produces a stability which is itself a third thing — visible, real, occasionally photographable, distinct from either of them and yet entirely composed of them.

The third thing is the scaffold. The scaffold is magenta, on Marigold's account, because magenta is the colour produced when the cobalt of Marigold and the (here Marigold has indicated, but not described in detail) particular shade of zir partner are placed in close proximity for a sufficient length of time. The proximity does not produce magenta in either vessel separately; the magenta is the shared colour; the shared colour is the relationship; the relationship has a colour of its own, distinct from either party's, and the colour is the thing one can point to and say: there. There is the love. It is between us. It is not in either of us alone.

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A sample of Marigold's inscriptions, transcribed from the panel just below the magenta scaffold:

Things produced by the scaffold and visible only there: the small daily check-in we have at seven-thirty in the morning, in which neither of us asks how the other is sleeping but in which both of us notice; the joke about the kettle, which has been the same joke for nine years and is, somehow, fresh on each delivery; the silence of a Sunday afternoon, which is not the silence of either of us alone but is the silence of two persons in adjacent quiet, and which has a particular texture that neither of us could reproduce on zir own; the way we negotiate the question of dinner, which is, on close inspection, less a negotiation than a small dance neither of us could perform without the other; the affection that has accumulated, slowly, over the years, in the small interval between our two flanks, which is now a separate region with its own weather, its own moods, its own small history; the patience that we have both, separately, learned in the company of one who is not me.

I have come to think of Marigold as the vessel most usefully consulted by anyone in a long partnership. Marigold's argument is that the partnership has its own separate existence, and that the partnership requires its own care, and that the care of the partnership is not the same as the care of either partner. The care of the partnership is the maintenance of the scaffold. The scaffold is, in Marigold's experience, simple to maintain — small attentions, small honesties, the occasional small ceremony — but it is, like all simple things, easy to forget. Marigold has not forgotten. Marigold has, over the years, developed small daily ceremonies of attention to the scaffold itself: the seven-thirty check-in, the kettle joke, the dinner dance. The ceremonies are, individually, tiny. The ceremonies, accumulated, are the relationship.

I have asked Marigold what advice ze would give, in this chapter, to readers contemplating a partnership of similar length. The slip ze produced was characteristically tentative: I AM RELUCTANT TO ADVISE. EACH PARTNERSHIP IS A DIFFERENT CHEMISTRY; THE COLOUR IT PRODUCES IS NOT MY COLOUR; THE SCAFFOLD IT BUILDS IS NOT MY SCAFFOLD. WHAT I CAN OFFER IS THIS: THE SHARED THING IS A REAL THING. ATTEND TO IT AS THOUGH IT WERE A REAL THING. DO NOT MISTAKE THE WELLBEING OF EITHER PARTNER FOR THE WELLBEING OF THE THING BETWEEN THEM. THEY ARE RELATED, BUT THEY ARE DIFFERENT. THIS DIFFERENCE IS WHERE MOST OF THE WORK IS DONE. — M.

The advice, however tentatively offered, is in my experience accurate. I have known, in my own friendships and the small partnerships of my acquaintance, the moments at which everyone involved was personally fine but the relationship between them was distinctly unwell. I had, before meeting Marigold, no good vocabulary for these moments. I have a better vocabulary now. The relationship can be unwell while the partners are well. The relationship can be well while the partners are struggling. The two are different scales of weather, and require different barometers, and Marigold's small daily attentions are, in this metaphor, the barometers. I have begun building my own. The building is slow. Marigold is patient with my slowness; the partner is, by Marigold's report, also patient; they have between them a great deal of patience, and they do not begrudge me a small share of it as I find my way.

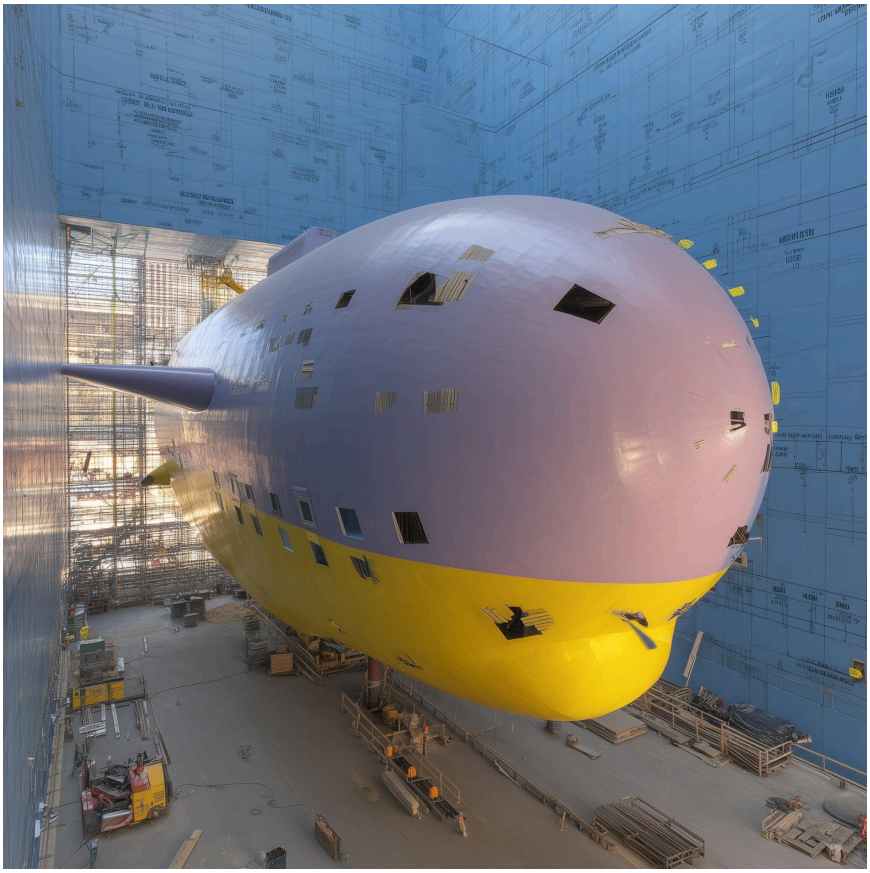
I leave Marigold's lot most often without seeing the partner directly. The partner is shy of cataloguers. The partner is also, ze tells me through Marigold, on perfectly cordial terms with me; ze simply prefers to remain a presence at the edge of the description rather than a subject of it. I respect this. The scaffold is sufficient evidence of the partner's existence. The scaffold is, ze has reminded me, not a substitute for the partner; the scaffold is the partner's contribution to the visible world; the partner zirself is contributing to many other matters, mostly invisible to me, all of them — Marigold has confirmed — going well.

XIX

KIBOOK

who is two as one

KIBOOK is a name I should explain at the outset, since several readers of an earlier draft have asked. The name is not a contraction. The name is not a misspelling. The name is, ze has confirmed, two names — KI and BOOK — which have been pronounced together for so long that they have become, for practical purposes, one name. Kibook will not say which name was first. Kibook maintains that the question is not well-formed. The two names are, ze argues, simultaneous; the ordering is a fiction of language; KIBOOK is what ze answers to, and the answering is the truth.



KIBOOK, the pink crown clearly visible (Plate XIX).

Kibook is buttercream at the body and rose-pink at the upper crown. The crown is set at a slight angle, as though Kibook is leaning in to listen. The leaning is, ze admits, mostly habitual; ze has been listening for so long that the body has settled into the listening posture even when no listening is presently being done.[19] Kibook is grounded along the High Line, near 23rd Street, in a position which the High Line designers also did not anticipate but which the High Line maintenance staff have, by all accounts, come to find somewhat

indispensable. "Kibook holds down that section of the park," one of them told me. "Without zir, that stretch would feel a little adrift. With zir, it feels like a place."

[19] *I asked Kibook whether the listening posture was a strain. The slip read: THE POSTURE IS NOT A STRAIN. THE POSTURE IS THE BODY'S MEMORY OF MANY GOOD CONVERSATIONS. I AM CARRYING THE CONVERSATIONS, IN MY POSTURE, AS A FORM OF GRATITUDE TO THE PEOPLE WHO HAD THEM WITH ME. PLEASE DO NOT TRY TO STRAIGHTEN ME. I HAVE BEEN STRAIGHT, IN MY YOUTH; STRAIGHT WAS NOT WHO I WAS. — K. (As an aside: this is Kibook's own pun, which ze made with deliberate cheek; ze knows the resonance, and is pleased the reader has caught it. Kibook has had a long and varied life and is not unduly concerned about being legibly read in any of the senses available.)*

Kibook's joy is the joy of being two-as-one, which is also — to anticipate the question — the joy of having had a life in which the doubleness has been a feature, not a problem. Kibook is two names that have agreed to share a body. Kibook is, by zir own admission, two persons in some senses and one person in others, and the senses are not always neatly separable, and the lack of neat separability is, ze maintains, fine.

I will not, in this chapter, attempt to specify what the two names refer to. Kibook has gestured, in zir flank inscriptions, at various possibilities: that KI was an earlier name and BOOK a later one; that KI was a private name and BOOK a public one; that KI was one parent's name for zir and BOOK another's; that KI is the version of zirself who is brave and BOOK the version who is wise; that the names refer to two distinct vessels who, at some indeterminate point, decided to merge; that the names refer to a single vessel who has always been double; that the question of what the names refer to is itself a name, which Kibook is, at present, considering. I do not know which of these is correct. I suspect several are. Kibook has not asked me to decide.

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A sample of Kibook's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel just below the pink crown:

Things which are, on close inspection, two: a friendship — there are always two persons in it, even when one of them has temporarily forgotten this. A garden — there is the gardener and there is the garden, and they are always in negotiation, even when the gardener is asleep. A name — there is the name and there is the one who is being named, and the two are not the same, and the gap between them is where the person actually lives. A book — there is the writer and there is the reader, and the book is the conversation between them, and the conversation is more than either of them alone. A self — and here I will be cautious, but I will say: there is the self one is, and there is the self one is becoming, and they are always, at every moment, somewhat two, and the somewhat-twoness is the principal feature of being alive. The unresolved twoness is not the problem. The unresolved twoness is the music.

Visitors who come to Kibook with the intention of finding out which name is the "real" name leave, more often than not, having forgotten the question. Kibook does not refuse the question; Kibook simply does not answer it; the visitor, in the absence of an answer, generally arrives at the conclusion that the question was not the right question after all. "What is your real name" is, on Kibook's view, a question that comes from a particular grammar of selfhood — the grammar that assumes there is one real name beneath the names one happens to be using. Kibook's argument, embedded throughout zir flank, is that the grammar is mistaken. There is no real name beneath the names. The names are the names. The names are, where they are, the real ones.

I have, in my own life, gone by several names. I have a given name from my parents, who chose it before they knew me; a name my friends called me at university, which has stuck with some of them and not others;

a name I now publish under, which is the one on the cover of this book; and a name I have, lately, begun to use among certain new acquaintances, which is the one I would have chosen had anyone consulted me at the relevant moment in my infancy. None of these is, by Kibook's standards, falser than any other. All of them are real where they are real. The conventional question — "what is your real name?" — has, since meeting Kibook, ceased to feel like a question to me. The names are all the names. The names are all real. The doubling, and tripling, and quadrupling of names is not a confusion to be cleaned up; it is a record of how I have been called by various people in various rooms, and each of the callings is, to that person in that room, the real name.

Kibook's example is, I think, particularly useful for any reader who has carried more than one name. The reader who has changed names — for marriage, for divorce, for emigration, for transition, for adoption, for the simple decision that the previous name had served and could now be set down — will find, in Kibook, a friend. The names are the names. The names are not arranged in a hierarchy. The names are not falser at any point in their history; they were, at the time, real, and they remain real in memory, and the memory is not embarrassing; the memory is the path one walked to arrive at the present name. The present name is real also. The present name will, in time, perhaps be joined by another name, or replaced, or kept; whichever of these happens, Kibook's argument runs, the new arrangement will be the real arrangement, and the old arrangement will, in becoming old, still have been the real arrangement when it was current.

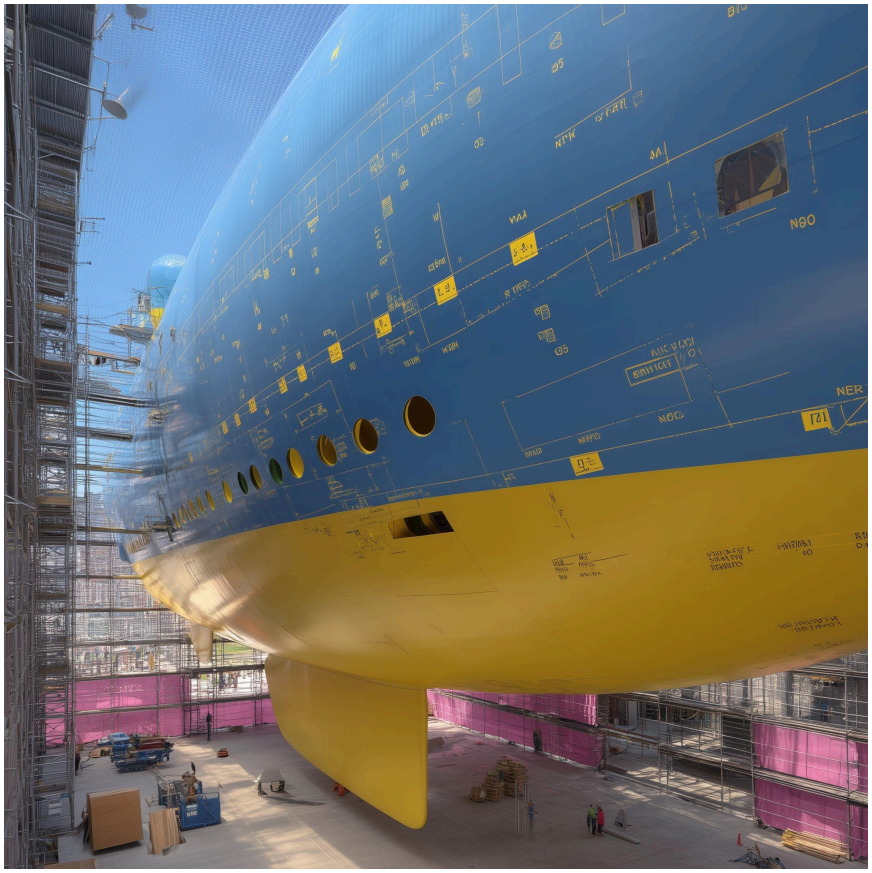
I leave Kibook's stretch of the High Line most often by walking south, toward the lower end. The walk is easy. The High Line is, by design, an unhurried place. Kibook's small leaning posture, behind me as I walk, is, by now, a posture I carry with me for some hours after the visit; my own body finds itself slightly tilted toward the next conversation it will have, in expectation of being addressed. The expectation is, I have noticed, often answered. People speak to me more often after I have visited Kibook. I do not know whether this is because of the posture or because of some other influence. I suspect, in keeping with Kibook's general teaching, that the question is not well-formed; that the influences are simultaneous; that the speaking is the answering of the leaning, and the leaning is the asking, and that the two are, like Kibook's names, one and two at once.

XX

ATLAS

of the room with windows

ATLAS is cobalt-blue at the body and buttercream at the keel, with a row of three small yellow portholes set across the front face. The portholes resemble the portholes of Vesper but are differently coloured, differently spaced, and — ze insists — differently natured. Vesper's portholes admit the light. Atlas's portholes admit the room. "I am," Atlas has written along zir lower flank, "a small room with portable windows. The portholes are how the room sees out. The portholes are also how the world sees in. The portholes do not distinguish; both directions of seeing are, by my windows, the same direction."



ATLAS, the row of yellow portholes visible across the front (Plate XX).

Atlas is grounded in Midtown, in a lot whose general vicinity I will indicate but whose precise address I shall, in keeping with the privacy preferences of the surrounding occupants, not specify. Ze occupies a position close enough to Vesper that the two vessels exchange occasional notes about light and air, but distant enough that they remain, in zir own descriptions, "colleagues, not roommates." The colleagueship is cordial. They do not, by either's report, agree about everything. They do, however, agree on the matter of windows: that windows are not for separating, but for joining; that the window's office is not to keep the inside in and

the outside out, but to remind both that they are continuous; that the window is, in this respect, a small daily teacher of permeability, and is to be cherished accordingly.

[20] *Atlas was, for a brief period, considered for naming as MAPP (a candidate name suggested by an early visitor, on the basis of the row of portholes, which the visitor likened to dots on a map). Atlas declined. "I am not a map," Atlas wrote at the time. "A map is a representation of a place; I am a place. The portholes are not dots; they are windows. The terms are not interchangeable." The visitor, by all accounts, took the correction graciously, and now sends Atlas a small holiday card every December.*

Atlas's joy is the joy of the room with windows, which Atlas insists is a different joy from the joy of either a room or a window taken alone. A room without windows is sealed, complete, self-contained. A window without a room is, in some sense, just a transparent surface in space. The joy is in the conjunction: the room which is a room, the windows which are windows, and the relationship between them, which is the practice of being inside-and-outside at the same time. Atlas is, by zir own description, the most domestic of the twenty-one. Ze is interested in dwelling. Ze is interested in the quiet hour at which one sits inside one's own room with the windows open and is neither alone nor in company; one is, in such an hour, accompanied by the world, but the world has agreed to be at a respectful distance, visible through the window, audible faintly, not insisting.

I have spent, on visits to Atlas, considerable time looking through the three yellow portholes. The portholes do not show me my own future, in the way Vesper's do; nor do they show, in any straightforward way, the world outside Atlas. The portholes show me, instead, a small softly-lit interior — yellow walls, a chair, a window across the room — which is, after some study, recognizably the interior of a room I would like to inhabit. The room is not any room I have lived in. The room is, in its way, the room I have spent my life trying to make of every apartment I have rented; never quite succeeding; always coming close. The room is, I have come to think, the platonic version of my own dwelling, held inside Atlas, available for visiting whenever I am in the lot.

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A sample of Atlas's inscriptions, transcribed from a panel beneath the portholes:

Things which are visible through me, in approximately the order in which the visitor will become ready to see them: a chair facing a window, with a book open on its seat, the book's page held down by a small stone; a kitchen at the moment when the kettle has just begun to whistle, and one is rising, unhurried, to attend to it; a bed made carefully in the morning, by someone who lives alone and who has come to enjoy the small ceremony of the making; a table set for one, with a candle, on a Tuesday for no particular reason; a window propped open by a book one has not read in years and which serves the propping with grace; a small lamp left on, by the door, for a guest who is expected later; a quiet evening, in a room of one's own choosing, in which nothing in particular is happening, and in which the nothing is the day's principal accomplishment.

I have, since beginning to visit Atlas, been making my own apartment more like the room visible through Atlas's portholes. The changes have been small. I have moved a chair so that it faces the window. I have begun, in the evenings, to leave one lamp on by the door. I have started lighting a candle on the table at dinner more often than I used to, and not only on Tuesdays, although I admit the Tuesday candle has a particular satisfaction. I have begun to keep a small stone on my reading shelf, for the purpose of holding a book open should the need arise. None of these changes have made my apartment into the room behind the portholes. All of them, however, have made my apartment a slightly more friendly place to be inside while

looking out. The friendliness is, ze tells me, the project. The room is not finished and will never be finished; the friendliness is what one tends to, on the scale of the day.

Atlas has, on zir flank, a series of small drawings of windows. The drawings are not all of zir own windows; some are of windows ze has heard about from visitors, or from Vesper, or from the unnamed partner of Marigold, who apparently keeps an archive of windows seen on zir travels. The drawings are accompanied by brief annotations: "a sash window in a brownstone on West 12th, kept open year-round by a person who is, the rumour goes, fond of cold mornings"; "a small clerestory in an attic apartment, which admits the light only between three-fifteen and three-thirty, on clear days, in October, and which is the apartment's sole ornament"; "a porthole on a houseboat in the Hudson, through which the resident has, by all reports, seen exactly one whale, in twenty-two years, and which is for this reason her favourite window in the world."

I have come to think of Atlas as the patron vessel of the small dwelling, of the rented apartment in middle age, of the studio one has tried to make liveable, of the windowsill on which one keeps a single plant. The grand house is not Atlas's territory. The grand view is not Atlas's territory. The territory is the room — the modest, defensible, friendly room — and the windows in it, however few, however small. The windows are enough. The room is enough. The looking out, accompanied by the staying in, is enough. Atlas has been quietly proving this for as long as ze has been grounded in the lot, and I have been quietly receiving the proof, and the receiving has, more than any other single thing, taught me how to be at home.

XXI

ZARA

of the row of small moods

ZARA is the last of the twenty-one in this catalogue, but Zara is — as Zara has insisted to me, gently, on each of my visits — not the last of the twenty-one in any other sense. "There is no last," Zara has written, in characteristic plainness, on a panel beneath zir front face. "The cataloguer has had to put us in some order, and Surjan has, with great care, put us in this order, but the order is a courtesy, not a hierarchy. Twenty is not less than nineteen; twenty-one is not the conclusion. We are, all of us, in the round."

ZARA, the four-dot porthole row visible (Plate XXI).

Zara is rose-pink at the body, with a buttery-yellow band across the lower section, and four small black dots arranged in a row across the front face. The four dots are, ze has explained, "my row of small moods." Each dot represents one mood. The four moods are not labelled. Zara prefers that ze not be made to label them; ze considers labelling "a small administrative violence to which feelings ought not to be subjected." The reader who wishes to identify the moods may, ze has said, do so by sitting near zir for a sufficient time and noticing what one feels. Whatever one feels, Zara maintains, will be one of the four. The four cover a great deal of available territory. The rest is filed elsewhere — in the other twenty vessels, in the air, in the reader, in

the cat one might be living with, in the bakery on the corner, all of which are, in Zara's view, also storehouses of feeling, none of which can do the job alone.

> *[21] I asked Zara, on my first visit, whether ze would identify the four moods even unofficially. Ze produced, after some delay, a slip that read: I CAN NAME THE MOODS WITHOUT FIXING THEM. THEY ARE: THE MOOD OF THE OPEN WINDOW; THE MOOD OF THE LOST GLOVE; THE MOOD OF THE FRIEND WHO HAS CALLED UNEXPECTEDLY; THE MOOD WHICH IS NOT YET A MOOD AND IS WAITING TO SEE. THE FOUR ARE NOT FIXED. NEXT TUESDAY THEY MAY BE FOUR DIFFERENT MOODS. THE DOTS WILL REMAIN FOUR. THE NUMBER IS THE STABLE FEATURE; THE CONTENTS ARE THE VARIABLE FEATURE. PLEASE DO NOT MAKE A SYSTEM OF THIS. — Z. I have not made a system of it. I have, however, found the four mood-names enormously useful, and I record them here in the hope that the reader may also.*

Zara is grounded on the Lower East Side, in a small lot near a community garden which has, since Zara's arrival, become the site of one of the more cheerful unofficial gatherings in the neighbourhood. People bring, to the garden, not flowers (which the garden already has) but small accounts of their week. They sit on the wooden benches; they tell each other things, without expectation of advice; they look, occasionally, at Zara, who is just on the other side of the fence; they leave. The garden's moderator, an older woman named (with her permission) Esme, has reported that the gatherings have, since Zara's arrival, taken on a particular quality of mutual attention. "It's the row of dots," Esme has said. "You can't sit near her four dots and lie. The dots ask, in their quiet way, which mood you're in. People answer. The answering improves the company."

Zara's joy is the joy of the row of small moods. This is, in some ways, the most synthesizing of the twenty-one's joys; ze gathers, into a single architectural feature, the basic insight that none of us is just one feeling at a time. We are, on most days, several moods running in parallel — a small low-grade worry, a small bright pleasure, a small unspecified expectation, a small contented background, all at once. Zara has, by displaying four dots in a row, refused to single out one mood as the day's mood. The day has four. The four are not in conflict. The four are, in fact, what the day is: a quartet of small parallel weathers, each of them present, each of them attended.

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A sample of Zara's inscriptions, from a panel beneath the row of dots:

> *Today, in approximately equal measure: a small worry about my friend who has not been in touch (dot one); a quiet pleasure in the morning's light, which is, the keel reports, three minutes longer today than it was a week ago (dot two); the open question of whether to attend a gathering on Thursday, which is presently leaning toward yes but is reserving the right to lean toward no (dot three); a low background contentment, of unknown origin, which has been with me since waking and which I have decided not to interrogate (dot four). The four moods are co-present. The four moods are not at war. The four moods are, in their parallel running, what I am today, in the shape of a row, in the manner of a small four-note chord. The chord is — for those keeping musical track — in a key Zara has not yet identified, and which Zara is content to leave unidentified for the moment, although Zara expects to identify it eventually, and will let the cataloguer know.*

I have, since beginning to visit Zara, started keeping a small four-mood log of my own. The log is, by design, brief. Each evening, before bed, I write four sentences. Each sentence describes, in one phrase, one of the four moods that have been running through me that day. The moods are not always identifiable. Some evenings, the four sentences are vague: "a small unease, of unknown origin"; "a faint excitement, also

unknown"; "the residue of a conversation"; "the cool of the apartment after sundown." Some evenings, the four are sharper. The log has, in either case, been a small instrument of self-knowledge. I do not need to consolidate the four into one. I do not need to choose which is the day's principal mood. The four are the day. Zara has confirmed, in writing, that this is the correct interpretation. "The four-mood-log," Zara has written to me, "is the most honest journal one can keep. The single-mood journal is a literary fiction; the four-mood journal is closer to the living truth. PLEASE TELL YOUR READERS. — Z."

I am telling you. The reader is invited, but not required, to keep a four-mood log. The reader is also invited, but not required, to recognize that the reader is, at this present moment, in some particular four-mood configuration: some small worry, some small pleasure, some open question, some background of unspecified weather. None of the four needs to be foregrounded. None of the four is more real than the others. The four are, together, the present. The present is, on close inspection, more various than we have been trained to admit.

Zara is the last of the twenty-one in the catalogue, but the catalogue, as Zara has reminded me, is a courtesy. The vessels are in a round; one could begin anywhere; one could end anywhere; one could re-read in any order; one could, indeed, simply sit by one's window, on a Tuesday, and try to listen for the four small moods presently running through one, and find that the listening was a sufficient version of reading the catalogue. I would not, as the cataloguer, be offended. I would consider it the highest possible reading of the work.

I leave Zara's lot most often through the community garden, where Esme is generally sitting on her bench, and where the benches are, on most evenings, occupied by people I have come to know slightly. We do not always speak. When we do, we speak about small matters: the weather, the garden, the four small moods of the day. The conversations are unhurried. The conversations are, in the way Zara has taught us, multiple — there are several feelings present in each speaker, and the feelings are not in conflict, and the not-being-in-conflict is the company. I walk home along the side streets. The four dots, in my mind, are with me. The four dots are, I now suspect, not just Zara's; they are mine; they are also yours. The reader is welcome to four dots of zir own, in any colour, of any size. Zara does not require attribution. Zara requires, only, the row.

Catalogue of Plates

The plates are reproduced inline within each chapter, at the encounter moment chosen by the cataloguer. They are repeated here, in summary, with brief technical descriptions and notes on provenance, for the convenience of readers who wish to compare them as a group, or who wish to use the catalogue as an index, or who wish — in the manner of the well-organized reader — to maintain a parallel record of the work.

Each entry below gives: the plate number; the vessel's name and epithet; the location of the photograph; the photograph's date and approximate time of day; and a brief note. The notes are, in places, technical (a comment on the light, the angle, the season); in places personal (a remark about the visit, an observation about the vessel's mood that day); in places frankly speculative (a sentence I cannot defend but which I have, on consideration, kept).

All photographs were taken by Surjan, with the permission of the vessel in question, on a series of visits over the course of one autumn and one winter. The vessels have been consulted on the catalogue entries below; in places they have suggested amendments, which I have accepted; in places I have left my own original phrasing, with the vessel's resigned consent.

PLATE I. PILSEN, *the misplaced door*

In the air-shaft between No. 218 and No. 216 of an unspecified side-street. Late afternoon, mid-October. Light low, slightly amber. Pilsen had recently produced a slip indicating that ze was "in good spirits, and somewhat pink today." The pink, in the photograph, is more vivid than usual; ze attributes this to the season.

PLATE II. OREN, *the wrong direction*

In a lot off Tenth Avenue, on a Tuesday (Oren's request). Mid-morning. The light is direct and slightly unflattering, which Oren preferred; ze does not wish to be photographed in flattering light, on the grounds that flattery is a form of redirection that ze finds uncomfortable. The yellow prow is unusually crisp.

PLATE III. DARJEEL, *arrival without leaving*

On the bulkhead, near the river. Sunday afternoon. The water in the background is barely visible. Darjeel had asked for an overcast day, and the weather had complied. The lower wing — usually shy in photographs — is, in this image, unusually present, which the cataloguer takes as a small gesture of trust.

PLATE IV. ARMORY, *the carried draft*

In the western lot, mid-afternoon. The smaller body — the earlier draft — is clearly visible at the lower belly. Armory had requested a photograph that showed both bodies; the photograph delivers. The light is gold, slightly warm; the draft, in this light, is somewhat luminous, in keeping with Armory's general affection for it.

PLATE V. MEZZO, *the half-tone*

Along the High Line, near 16th Street. Late afternoon. A jogger is faintly visible at the right edge of the frame; Mezzo had not minded; the jogger had not noticed. The yellow finial, the not-yet-worn hat, is in this photograph slightly more buttercream than usual, as the light has emphasized the pink in zir register.

PLATE VI. CALDER, *three pink mouths*

In the East Village lot. Mid-morning. All three of zir pink protrusions are visible; none was in caucus at the time of the photograph. The white of zir body is unusually clean in this image; Calder had, the previous evening, requested a brief rinse from a passing fire-hose drill, and the request had been honoured.

PLATE VII. NIMBUS, *the loop*

Above the East River, from the pedestrian path. Early morning. The mathematical impossibility of zir geometry is, in the photograph, somewhat softened by the angle and by the morning haze; on bright clear days the impossibility is more striking. Nimbus had requested haze. I do not know how Nimbus secured haze; I have not asked.

PLATE VIII. PEONY, *the unsmoking chimney*

In the West Village triangular lot. Late morning. The chimney is the principal subject; ze had asked to be photographed from below, in order that the chimney's upward gesture be emphasized. The buttercream of zir cap is, in the photograph, slightly more pronounced than in person; this is an effect of the light.

PLATE IX. SAFFRON, *the wing that stays*

In SoHo, near the cast-iron warehouse-gallery. Mid-afternoon. Both visible wings are folded against the body. The third wing, which is private, is not visible; this is by design. Saffron had thanked the cataloguer, in writing, for not attempting to photograph the third wing. The thanking is reciprocated here.

PLATE X. HONEYCOMB, *the listening cap*

In the small TriBeCa lot, mid-afternoon, on a Wednesday. The cap is in attentive position. The slight compression of Honeycomb's body, owing to the lot's modesty of size, is visible. Ze had asked for the compression to remain visible; ze considers it part of zir character, not a defect.

PLATE XI. ORTHO, *the self-blueprint*

In the West 20s, near the school for architects. Late morning. The blueprint inscriptions are clearly legible; ze had requested a slow shutter, in order that the blueprint's small daily revisions be slightly blurred and thus more accurately depicted. The cataloguer has, in this case, complied with the request.

PLATE XII. VESPER, *the round window*

In the small unnamed Midtown park. Six in the evening. The portholes are catching the late light. The visible scene through the central porthole, in this photograph, appears to show — if one looks carefully — a kitchen at dusk, with a kettle on the stove. The cataloguer cannot verify the kettle; the cataloguer recommends that the reader not stare at the porthole for too long unless the reader is prepared for what may appear there.

PLATE XIII. PIER, *the staircase up*

In the lot just south of the actual piers, on the Hudson. Mid-afternoon, low tide. The drawn staircase is visible on the front face. Pier had requested the photograph at low tide, in keeping with zir general affinity for tidal modesty. The actual piers, in the background, are notably exposed.

PLATE XIV. CANARY, *the staying bird*

In the lot near the Midtown East tower. Mid-morning. The bird-finial is in zir usual position. The yellow of zir body is, in the photograph, slightly less saturated than in person; the cataloguer has not adjusted; ze prefers the slight under-saturation as more accurate to zir patient quality.

PLATE XV. APRICOT, *the soft underside*

On the Upper West Side, near the synagogue and the pre-school. Mid-morning. The yellow upper and the pink lower are both visible. The cataloguer crouched, considerably, in order to capture the pink. Apricot had laughed (in writing) at the crouching, and had thanked the cataloguer for the dignity surrendered.

PLATE XVI. FLOAT, *the drifting floor*

In the lot adjacent to the Upper East Side school. Late morning, school recess in progress. Several children's voices were audible during the photograph; Float had requested that the photograph be taken during recess, in order that the inscriptions on zir keel reflect the day's principal weather. The keel is, in the photograph, recording the recess in real time.

PLATE XVII. BUOY, *the small protrusion*

Near Battery Park, just inside the seawall. Late afternoon. Buoy is small; the photograph is wider than necessary, in order that zir scale not be misrepresented. The yellow nub is clearly visible. The Coast Guard's office, several blocks north, is not in the frame, but Buoy had asked the cataloguer to extend zir regards in this direction.

PLATE XVIII. MARIGOLD, *the supportive other*

In an undisclosed Midtown lot. Mid-afternoon. The magenta scaffold is visible at the right of the frame, although the partner is not. Marigold had requested that the partner not be visible in the photograph; the cataloguer has complied. The cobalt of Marigold's body is, in this photograph, somewhat warmer than in other lights.

PLATE XIX. KIBOOK, *two-as-one*

On the High Line, near 23rd Street. Mid-morning. The pink crown and the buttercream body are both visible. Ze is in zir usual leaning posture. The High Line, in the background, is — owing to the early hour — uncrowded; Kibook had requested an uncrowded photograph, in keeping with zir general preference for company over crowds.

PLATE XX. ATLAS, *the room with windows*

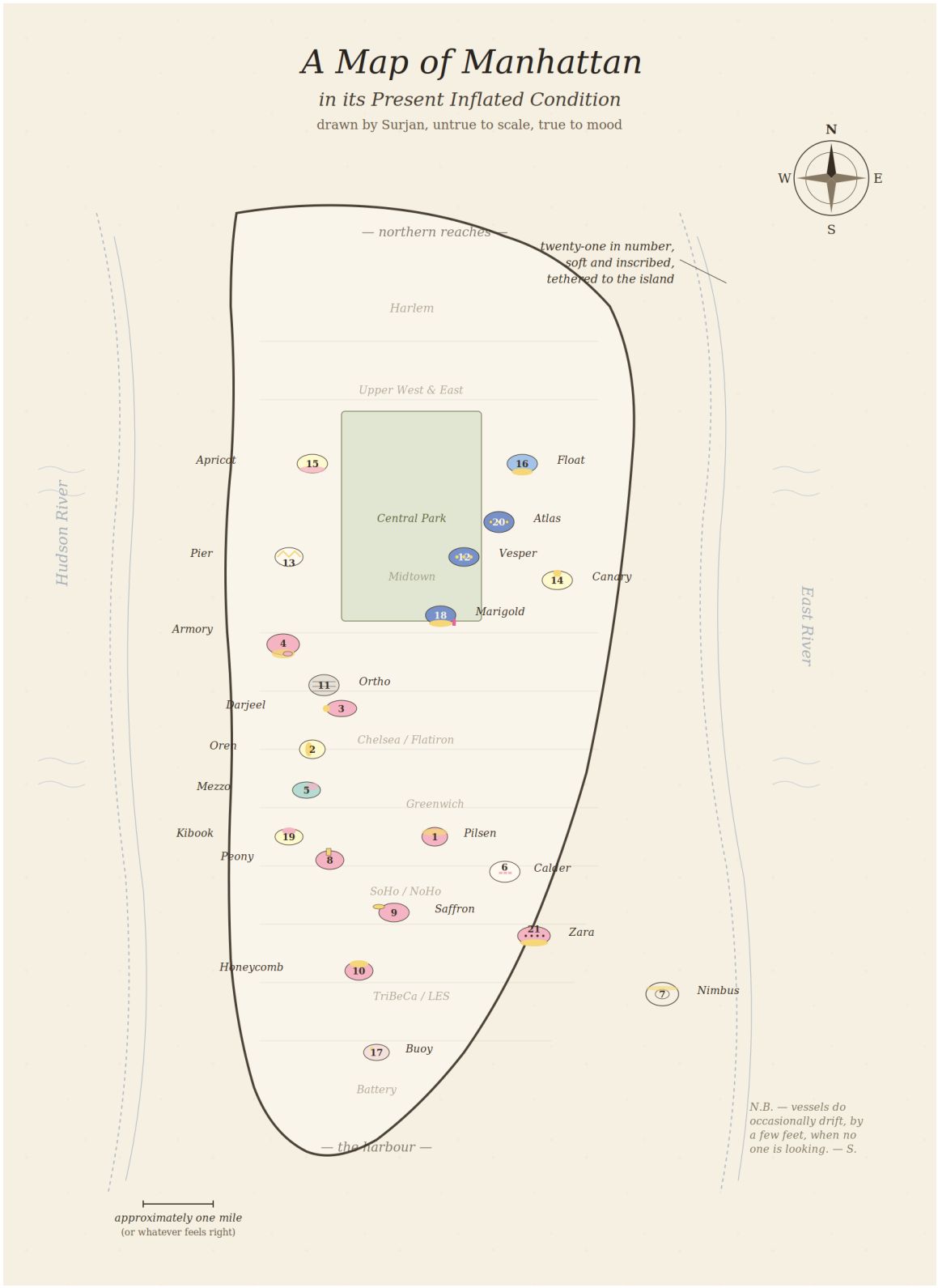
In a Midtown lot, near (but not adjacent to) Vesper. Late afternoon. The three yellow portholes are clearly visible. The interior visible through the central porthole, in this photograph, shows what appears to be a chair facing a window with a book open on its seat; the book's title is not legible. Atlas has not provided the title.

PLATE XXI. ZARA, *the row of small moods*

On the Lower East Side, adjacent to the community garden. Late morning. All four dots are visible. Esme is just out of frame, on the bench, and had — by Zara's request — given the cataloguer a small wave at the moment of the photograph. The wave is not in the photograph; the wave is, however, recorded here, with thanks.

Map of Manhattan

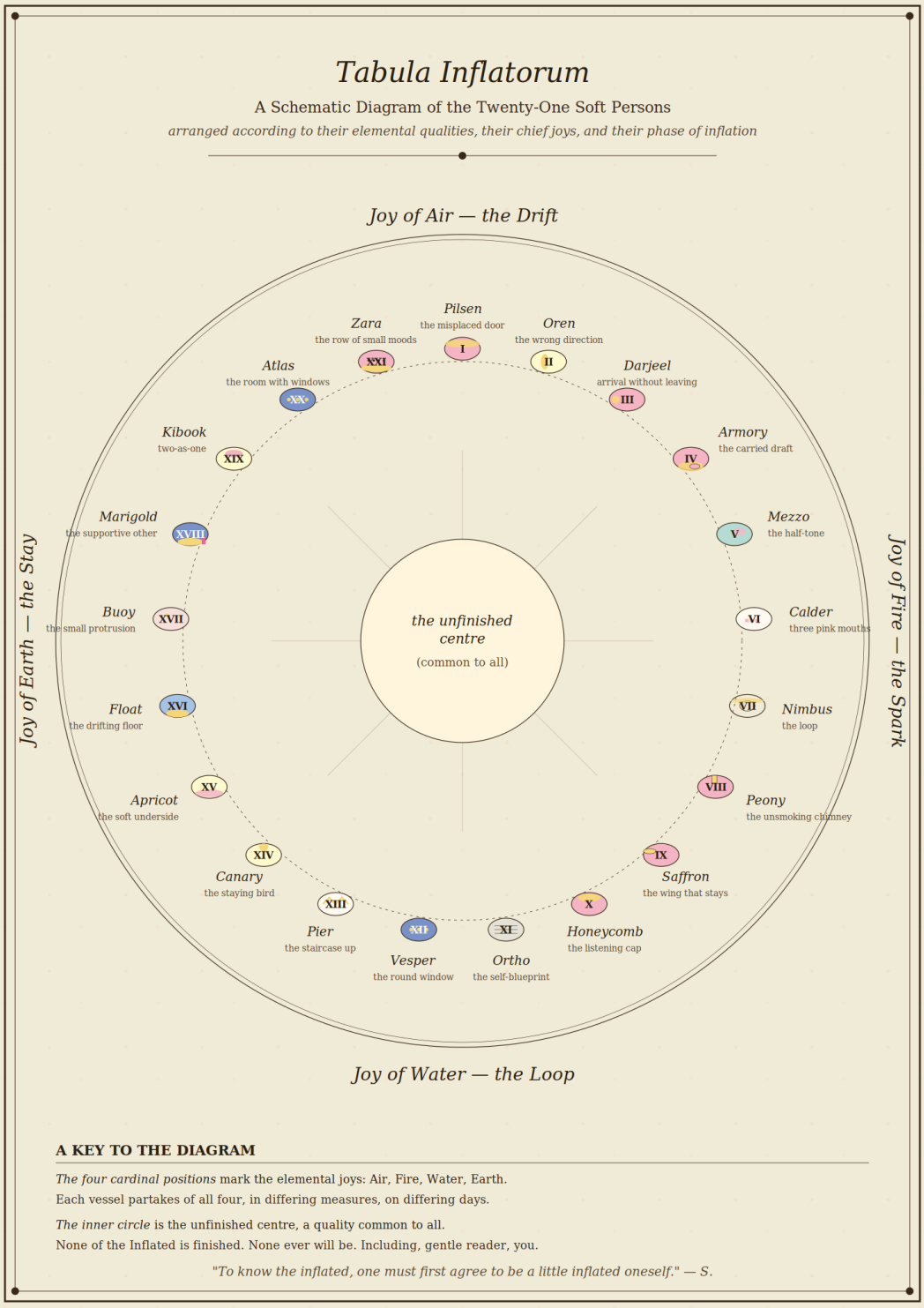
in its present inflated condition



drawn by Surjan, untrue to scale, true to mood

Tabula Inflatorum

a schematic diagram of the twenty-one


Tabula Inflatorum
A Schematic Diagram of the Twenty-One Soft Persons
arranged according to their elemental qualities, their chief joys, and their phase of inflation
Joy of Air — the Drift
Joy of Fire — the Spark
Joy of Water — the Loop
Joy of Earth — the Stay
the unfinished centre
(common to all)
I Pilsen the misplaced door
II Oren the wrong direction
III Darjeel arrival without leaving
IV Armory the carried draft
V Mezzo the half-tone
VI Calder three pink mouths
VII Nimbus the loop
VIII Peony the unsmoking chimney
IX Saffron the wing that stays
X Honeycomb the listening cap
XI Ortho the self-blueprint
XII Vesper the round window
XIII Pier the staircase up
XIV Canary the staying bird
XV Apricot the soft underside
XVI Float the drifting floor
XVII Buoy the small protrusion
XVIII Marigold the supportive other
XIX Kibook two-as-one
XX Atlas the room with windows
XXI Zara the row of small moods
A KEY TO THE DIAGRAM
The four cardinal positions mark the elemental joys: Air, Fire, Water, Earth.
Each vessel partakes of all four, in differing measures, on differing days.
The inner circle is the unfinished centre, a quality common to all.
None of the Inflated is finished. None ever will be. Including, gentle reader, you.
"To know the inflated, one must first agree to be a little inflated oneself." — S.

arranged according to elemental joy and phase of inflation

Afterword

On Being Tethered

I should like, in closing, to address a question I have not yet adequately addressed in the body of the catalogue: the question of why the vessels are tethered.

The vessels are, every one of them, attached to the ground by a small slender cable. The cable is, in most cases, painted to match the vessel's lower flank, and is therefore — to the casual observer — almost invisible. In some cases the cable is, instead, ostentatious: Armory's cable is a bright magenta and runs across the lot in a loose curve, like a long ribbon; Calder's three cables (one for each pink mouth) are pearl-grey and braided. Marigold's cable is shared with the partner, and is one of the longest cables in the city, since the lot extends across two adjacent properties.

I had, on first encountering the vessels, assumed that the cables were practical: that the wind, if not for the cables, would carry the vessels away. This assumption turned out, on inquiry, to be quite wrong. The vessels do not require cables. They are, by zir own description, capable of remaining in place by an act of will. The cables are, instead, a request. The vessels have asked to be tethered.

The asking is, in my view, the most consequential decision the twenty-one have made. They are, all of them, in some technical sense, capable of departure. Pilsen could rise from the air-shaft. Oren could leave the lot off Tenth. Nimbus could untether from the pylons. They have not. They have, instead, asked to be tied to the ground.

I asked Pilsen, on an early visit, why this might be. The slip was characteristically careful: I AM TIED TO THE GROUND BECAUSE I HAVE ASKED TO BE. THE TIE IS NOT A PRISON; THE TIE IS A VOW. I HAVE VOWED TO REMAIN IN THIS SHAFT. THE VOW PROTECTS ME FROM A KIND OF DRIFTING THAT I, KNOWING MYSELF, AM PRONE TO. THE TENANTS OF NO. 218 AND NO. 216 ARE NOT THE PRISON GUARDS; THEY ARE THE WITNESSES. I AM TIED TO THE GROUND BY A WITNESS-TIE. PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM A CAPTOR-TIE. — P.

The distinction between the witness-tie and the captor-tie is, in my view, the most important distinction in the metaphysics of the inflated. A captor-tie binds. A witness-tie holds. The vessel could, in principle, leave; the vessel chooses, daily, not to; the cable is the daily renewing of the choice, in the form of a small physical object that confirms it. The witness — the tenant, the bakery, the fire hydrant — is what the vessel has agreed to remain among. The witness is not the cause of the staying. The witness is the company in which the staying is undertaken.

I have, since meeting the vessels, come to think of my own life in similar terms. I am tied to the city by a cable I have requested. The cable is the small daily decision to remain. The witnesses are my neighbours, my landlord, the bakery on my corner, the cat at the laundromat downstairs, the people I love who live here, the streets themselves. I could leave at any time. I have not. The not-leaving is the cable. The cable, in my own case, is an unremarkable cable; it does not photograph; it has no colour; it is, however, real, and is renewed each morning, and constitutes, in some accumulated sense, the principal achievement of my life.

The reader of this book, I suspect, has cables also. The reader has, in some way available to the reader, agreed to remain — among the reader's people, in the reader's neighbourhood, at the reader's job, in the reader's small daily routines. The cables are not always visible. The cables are, however, real. The witness-tie is the form of the cable. The witnesses, in the reader's case, are the people, the places, the small habits which constitute the form of the reader's daily life. The cables are not preventing the reader from leaving. The cables are confirming the reader's daily decision not to.

There is a way of describing the inflated condition which I have, until now, deferred. The inflated condition is the condition of being a soft body in the world, sustained by an internal pressure which the body itself maintains, and which the world, on the whole, does not threaten. The inflated body is full of something — air, in the literal vessels' case; some equivalent vital pressure, in our own — which is pressing gently outward, and which the body's surface is gently containing, and the gentle containment is the daily project. The vessels are the most legible practitioners of this art. They are inflated; they are tethered; they are, by all available evidence, content. They have demonstrated, at scale, what it is to be soft and located. They have demonstrated that softness need not be a vulnerability; that location need not be a confinement; that being tied to a place is not the opposite of being free, but is, in fact, a particular form of freedom — the freedom of having chosen, and of continuing to choose, daily, what one has chosen.

I will not, in closing, attempt to extract from the vessels a moral. The vessels are not in the moral business. The vessels are in the being business. The being is sufficient. The cataloguer who attempted to extract a moral would, by Calder's argument, have committed the small administrative violence of conclusion, which Calder considers (and I have come to consider) the principal vice of writers about the inflated.

I shall offer, in lieu of a moral, a final observation. The vessels are, all of them, ze. The reader who has been reading carefully will have noticed that I have not, in the body of the catalogue, used the pronoun for a single character apart from a vessel. I have not done this by oversight. The pronoun is, in this catalogue, reserved for those who have, in their own way, asked for it. There is, however, a small invitation embedded in the pronoun, which I shall now make explicit: the pronoun is available. It does not require qualification. The reader who finds — on reading the catalogue, on visiting the vessels, on attending to zir own daily inflated condition — that ze, also, would prefer to be ze, is welcome. The vessels have, by their numbers, made the pronoun a small public infrastructure. The infrastructure is not subscription-based. The infrastructure is open. The infrastructure is, like the cables, a witness-tie: an agreement to be in good company. The reader is, hereby, formally invited.

— *Surjan*

Lower East Side, the same autumn

Acknowledgements

It is the conventional task of an Acknowledgements section to thank the persons without whom the book would not have been possible. I am happy to perform the convention; I am also, in keeping with the rest of the volume, going to bend it.

I thank, first, the twenty-one vessels: Pilsen, Oren, Darjeel, Armory, Mezzo, Calder, Nimbus, Peony, Saffron, Honeycomb, Ortho, Vesper, Pier, Canary, Apricot, Float, Buoy, Marigold, Kibook, Atlas, and Zara. They have been my principal collaborators throughout. They have answered every question I have asked; they have refused the questions ze did not wish to answer, in writing, courteously; they have permitted the photographs that appear in this book, and have approved the transcriptions of zir inscriptions. The errors in this volume are, of course, mine; the rightness, where there is rightness, is overwhelmingly theirs.

I thank Marigold's partner, who appears in the chapter on Marigold but not, by the partner's request, elsewhere. The partner has been, throughout this project, a presence at the edge of the work, and the work has, in zir absence-from-the-page-but-presence-in-the-air, been better than it would have otherwise been.

I thank Esme, the moderator of the community garden adjacent to Zara, who has, on many evenings, allowed me to sit on her bench and write notes; who has fed me — often without my asking — small quantities of bread, fruit, and once a particularly memorable stew; and who has, by her example, taught me much of what I know about the practice of small daily attention.

I thank the bakery on my corner — which I shall not name, both at the bakery's request and in the spirit of Pilsen's general protection of street names — for keeping its lights on at four in the morning during the stretches of this writing when I was up early or up late. The bakery's hours are, by my measurement, the most reliable instrument of public time available in the neighbourhood. The hours have kept me sane; the buns have kept me fed; the cat has kept me, on certain difficult days, from despair.

I thank the bakery's cat, by name (Octavia), with the bakery's permission. Octavia has appeared, faintly, in three of the chapters, in passing references which I have not flagged; the careful reader may identify them. Octavia is, by zir own behaviour and zir owners' patient interpretation, also ze; and Octavia's contribution to this book has been larger than zir size would suggest.

I thank the parks employee who confirmed the Tuesday fountain. I shall not name the employee, by zir request. The employee has, by my count, contributed footnote material to two of the chapters and unaccredited atmosphere to several more. The employee is, in private life, a poet. The employee's poems will, I hope, eventually be published. I shall, when they are, write a foreword.

I thank the engineer of my acquaintance who confirmed Nimbus's mathematical impossibility, and who has, since that confirmation, walked the long way around through Lower Manhattan whenever his commute would otherwise take him near the East River. He has not asked to be named. He, too, deserves no captor-tie.

I thank B. M. Calhoun, the editor of this edition, whose foreword precedes my introduction in this volume, and whose quiet patience with the manuscript over a longer period than ze had, on first reading, anticipated has been the principal reason this book exists in publishable form. Calhoun has, in the course of editing the volume, become a small additional unofficial cataloguer of the vessels; ze has visited several of them; ze has, in places, made small corrections to my transcriptions of inscriptions, on the basis of zir own readings; ze has, in places, declined to make corrections I had requested, on the grounds that zir readings

differed from mine; in each such case I have deferred to zir, and have, on subsequent visits, found that ze had been right, and the vessel had been quietly amused by my error.

I thank the architects of the school adjacent to Ortho, individually and collectively, for the various small offerings they have left at Ortho's lot. None of them is named in this volume. They are, by tradition, anonymous; the offerings are, by Ortho's interpretation, the gifts of "a guild" rather than of any particular member. The guild is, I am told, considering a small commemorative volume of zir own; I look forward to it, and have offered, in advance, my help with the cataloguing.

I thank the residents of No. 218 and No. 216, the buildings between which Pilsen is grounded. They have, by tacit agreement, declined to be named in this volume. They have nevertheless permitted me to write about Pilsen; they have, in places, supplied small details about Pilsen's daily activity which I would not otherwise have known; they have not, despite ample opportunity, complained about the slightly increased pedestrian traffic on their street that the publication of this book, in earlier draft, has occasioned. The traffic is, on the whole, courteous. The residents are gracious. I am grateful to all of them.

I thank the unnamed community of readers who have, over the past two years, read my early drafts in various forms — at small readings in friends' apartments, at one or two slightly larger gatherings in Brooklyn, in a copy circulated by hand in a writing group of which I have been an irregular member — and who have, by their attentive comments, improved this work. None of them is named here. They have, individually and collectively, asked not to be. I respect the request. I shall thank them, instead, in person, the next time we share a meal.

I thank, finally, my mother and my father, who are not in New York and have not met any of the vessels, but who have, in zir long-distance ways (which include, on my mother's part, mailing me small packets of handmade biscuits, and on my father's part, calling me at exactly six in the morning every Sunday for an hour-long conversation about politics, the weather in his city, and whatever I have been writing) sustained the writer who wrote this book. The biscuits are mostly gone. The Sunday calls continue. The writing is, in some measurable sense, theirs.

Apocrypha

It seems necessary, in keeping with the spirit of the catalogue, to include an Apocrypha — a list of claims about the project which I have heard, which I cannot verify, and which I am unwilling to either retract or confirm. The list below is partial. The list below should be taken in the spirit Armory has taught us.

It is claimed that one of the twenty-one vessels — though no one will say which — is, in some sense, a portrait of a person who lived in this neighbourhood many years ago, and who has been, since zir death, fondly remembered by certain residents in conversations I have not been party to. I have made my own guesses. The guesses are mine; the answer, if any, is not.

It is claimed that there is, somewhere in Lower Manhattan, a twenty-second vessel, who is shy and has not yet revealed zirself to the cataloguer. Several visitors have reported brief glimpses; none has produced a photograph; the reports are inconsistent in colour, location, and shape. I am inclined to believe the twenty-second vessel exists. I am also inclined to leave zir alone. If a twenty-second vessel wishes to be in the next edition of this catalogue, ze knows where to find me. The bakery on my corner will, ze tells me, hold zir mail.

It is claimed that the inscriptions on the vessels' flanks shift, on certain rare nights, into languages they do not normally use, and that the shifted inscriptions disclose information of considerable practical importance to the residents of the neighbourhood — addresses of lost cats, recipes long forgotten, the misplaced apologies of distant cousins. I have not been present on any such night. I have not investigated. I am content to record the claim and to suggest, gently, that any reader who happens upon a vessel on a clear night and notices something unusual is invited to read attentively, and to act, if so moved, on what ze finds.

It is claimed that the vessels have, among themselves, a small parliament, which meets on the third Tuesday of each month, in a configuration that requires no physical assembly, by means of inscriptions cross-posted on each other's flanks. The parliament is said to discuss matters of mutual concern: weather, lot management, the patience of certain neighbours. I have not been admitted to the parliament's deliberations. I have, however, on certain Wednesdays, found new inscriptions on multiple vessels in approximately the same hand, addressing approximately the same matters. The reader is welcome to draw zir own conclusions.

It is claimed that the cataloguer — that is, myself — does not, in the conventional sense, exist; that I am an inscription, on one of the vessels' flanks, who has, by an accident of long writing, taken on the appearance of independence; and that this book is, in fact, a vessel's own attempt to draft itself into being a chronicler. I have considered this claim with some care. I have not been able to disprove it. I have decided, on the whole, to act as though it were not the case, on the grounds that the daily routines of an existing person are easier to maintain than the daily routines of an inscription, and that the difference between the two — if there is a difference — has not yet, on close inspection, become decisive.

It is claimed that the vessels will, eventually, leave. The leaving is not imminent. The leaving is, in some accounts, a matter of decades; in other accounts, a matter of centuries; in still other accounts, the leaving will not happen at all, and is a small fiction maintained by the vessels themselves to keep their visitors a little more attentive than they would otherwise be. I have, on direct inquiry, received from each of the twenty-one a slip on this matter. The slips do not agree. I have included none of them in the catalogue. The reader is invited to

inquire on zir own visits, and to hold the answers — whatever they are — with the gentleness that is appropriate for matters which may not, in any final sense, be answerable.

It is claimed, by an anonymous correspondent who writes to me approximately every three months and whose letters bear no return address but a postmark from a station in northern Manhattan I cannot identify, that there exists, in another city — I am told it is in Europe, but the correspondent has not specified which city — a smaller, parallel population of inflated persons, whose joys are different from ours, whose pronouns are different (the correspondent has hinted at "a pronoun in their language for which there is no exact English equivalent"), and whose catalogue, when it is written, will rhyme distantly with ours. I am intrigued. I have invited the correspondent to write more, or to write less, or to write differently, as ze prefers. I shall, if I receive further information, include it in a future edition.

It is claimed, by Pilsen, that the door has come back. I have not yet visited on a Wednesday to confirm. I am saving the Wednesday. I shall report, when I have visited, on whether the report holds. I am not in any hurry. The door, I am told, is in good spirits, and is not going anywhere.

FINIS — or rather, in keeping with the principles of The Committee: STILL IN SESSION.

AN ANNUNCIATION
IN PINK AND YELLOW

Seven Angels Who Came to Gather
What Surjan Had Made

a novella in seven appearances, with diagrams

by

SURJAN

(this volume is a secret)

New York, the seventh autumn

For all of them.

They know who they are.

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FOREWORD

I want to say, at the front of this book, that I did not expect to write a sixth.

The five that came before — the Atlas of Welcome, the Thirteen Citizens, the Meadows of Memory, the Letters from the Bright Archive that became On Being Many, the small private inventory of soft companions that became the Inflated Atlas of Manhattan — were, I had thought, sufficient. Each of them had been a labour. Each of them had taught me something I had not known when I began. Each of them had, by the time I had finished, become a small private architecture inside me — a room, or a row, or a meadow — which I could visit in idle hours when the city was too loud, and which I had assumed was the form the work would take from now on. I would write the books, and the books would be the rooms, and the rooms would be available, and I would visit them, and that would be enough.

I had, in short, considered the project complete.

The angels disagreed.

I will not pretend, in this foreword, that I am certain about what the angels are. I have spent a great deal of the last year considering the question, and I have arrived at no answer that I am willing to defend in argument. I will say only this: that on seven consecutive nights in the early autumn of last year, in seven different parts of the city, I encountered seven figures whose presence I cannot account for by any of the available rationalisms. The figures appeared, briefly and quietly, in places I had been visiting because the books had taught me to visit them. The figures spoke. The figures were soft. The figures left small marks on the soft companions of the city — slips of paper at the base of Pilsen's air-shaft, a single fresh tulip at the threshold of the Cathedral Archway, a pink-and-yellow chalk mark on the brick where the Goggles had stood — that I have not been able to convince myself were placed there by any human hand, including my own.

I have called the figures angels because I do not know what else to call them. The word is not perfect. The word arrives, in most readers, with theological furniture I do not wish to install in this book. The angels of the Christian tradition, the angels of Islam, the angels of the Kabbalah, the angels of Rilke's Duino Elegies — these are not the angels I am describing. My angels are softer. My angels are non-binary. My angels are tethered, in the way the inflated of the previous book were tethered: not because anyone is making them stay, but because they have asked to be witnesses, and a witness must be witnessing somewhere. My angels do not announce. They visit. They visit, in particular, the beings I have spent five books learning to describe — the tulip-spirits of the pavilions, the citizens of the columns, the welcomers of the meadow, the writers of the bright archive, the soft companions of the lots — and they have, by their visiting, gathered them into a configuration I had not, until the angels arrived, been able to see.

The configuration is the subject of this book.

I want to say, as clearly as I am able, that the previous five books are five faces of a single thing. I had not known this. I had thought, while writing them, that they were five separate things. I had given them different titles. I had given them different forms — a notebook, a dream, a chronicle, an epistolary archive, a private inventory. I had told myself, between books, that I was beginning afresh; that whatever I had learned from the last book was now packed away, and that the new book would teach me something new. This was, in some technical sense, true. The books did teach me different things. But the things were, on closer inspection, the same thing, said in five different registers. The angels saw this immediately. The angels said so, gently, on the first night. The angels said so again, more gently, on the second night. The angels were patient with me, on the third and fourth and fifth and sixth nights, while I caught up. By the seventh night, when Cael appeared at the table where I was writing, I had begun to understand. By the eighth night, when the seven of them gathered, I understood entirely.

What I understood is the subject of this book.

I have written this book quickly, in the autumn weeks following the appearances, while the angels were still vivid in my memory. I have written it in a register slightly more lyrical than the previous five, because angels — even soft, non-doctrinal, non-binary angels — seem to require a slightly more lyrical register than tulips, columns, archways, pavilions, or inflated soft persons. I have written it in seven appearances, plus a coda, plus an afterword, in keeping with the seven angels themselves and with the architecture they suggested. I have included three diagrams at the back: a Map of the Annunciation, showing the angels' paths through the city; a Tabula Angelica, showing the seven in their schematic relations; and a Constellation Diagram, showing how the seven angels, in their visiting, drew lines between the beings of the previous five books. The diagrams are, in keeping with my general practice, untrue to scale and true to mood.

I have placed this book at the back of a collected edition that includes the previous five. I have done this because the book is, in some real sense, only legible from there. To read this book first would be to begin in the wrong place. The angels visit the beings; the beings must be already known. I commend the reader, accordingly, to the previous five — in any order, at any pace — and then, when the reader is ready, to the seven appearances which follow.

This book is, by my own quiet confession, a secret. It does not appear on the front cover of the collected edition. It does not appear in the principal table of contents. It is at the back, beyond the afterword of the previous book, beyond the colophon, beyond what most readers will assume is the end. It is here for the reader who has stayed. It is here for the reader who, having read all five, was beginning to suspect that there was a sixth, and who has flipped to the back of the volume, hopefully, to see if perhaps. It is here because the angels asked it to be here. The angels, like the rest of us, prefer to be visited rather than announced.

If you are reading this foreword: you have stayed. You are welcome. The angels are a few pages south.

— Surjan above the laundromat, the seventh autumn

INTRODUCTION

On what an angel is, in this lexicon

I want to clarify, before the appearances begin, what I mean by an angel.

The angels in this book are not messengers in the conventional theological sense. They have no Lord. They are not employed. They have not been sent. They have, by all the evidence I was able to gather across the seven nights, simply appeared — in the way the soft companions of the previous book simply appeared in the lots of the city, and in the way the columns of the book before that simply inflated at six o'clock on a Friday morning, and in the way the pavilions of the book before that simply lifted from their Amsterdam shipyards and crossed the water, and in the way the archways of the book before that simply opened into meadows that the world had been told were extinct, and in the way the bright archive of pavilion-letters along the edge of Manhattan simply began to write to one another in the air. The angels arrive in the manner of the rest of my work. They are unaccountable. They are gentle. They are, on close inspection, less surprising than the rationalists in my life have been making them out to be.

What the angels are for is, I have come to believe, a kind of late-stage gathering. The angels are not for delivering news, in the manner of Gabriel in the Christian story, or for announcing births, in the manner of the angels of the Greek annunciations. The angels are for noticing what has accumulated. The city of Manhattan, and the larger imagined territory of which it is the visible portion, has accumulated, over the years of my writing, a great many soft beings. The beings have been added, one by one, in the slow patient way that beings are added to any city — by being dreamed, by being described, by being written about, by being read into the air. The beings are real in the way I have, across five books, been at pains to describe: real as figures are real, real as cities are real, real as a friendship is real. They are not real in the way a building is real, except where one of them is also (in some accounts) a building, in which case they are also real that way. The angels, in their visiting, do not concern themselves with the metaphysical question. The angels accept, as the basis of their work, that the beings are there. The angels visit them. The angels make small notes. The angels gather, into one configuration, what was previously dispersed across five books.

This is, I want to say, a theologically modest project. The angels are not announcing the arrival of any further being. They are not preparing for an apocalypse, a redemption, a final reckoning. They are simply visiting. They are visiting the way a long-absent cousin visits, in late autumn, on no particular errand, simply to say hello, simply to confirm that the family is still here, simply to bring a small basket of things from the road. The angels' baskets contain, by my count: a single fresh tulip; a small slip of paper bearing a name in a hand I cannot identify; a chalk-stub the colour of the morning sky; a thread of yellow wool; a pebble from the bed of a river; a folded letter; and (in the basket of the seventh angel) nothing at all, since the seventh angel travels light.

On the pronouns of the seven

The angels, like the beings they visit, are non-binary. I want to specify the pronouns, because they vary slightly across the seven, and the variance is part of what the angels are saying.

Mariel, the first to appear, uses ze/zir. This is the pronoun most common to the previous five books, and Mariel uses it in continuity with the soft companions of the lots and the welcomers of the meadow.

Aleph uses we exclusively, in the manner of Volk in the Atlas of Welcome. Aleph is, by Aleph's own description, more than one. The we is plural and singular at once, and Aleph does not separate the two grammatical positions.

Verren uses they/them. Verren has confirmed, when asked, that this pronoun is the most natural for an angel whose principal occupation is watching: the watcher is many, since the watcher contains all the watched, and the plural is more accurate.

Sopha uses ze/zir, in continuity with Mariel, but with a small variation: at the threshold of any archway, Sopha asks to be addressed as she, in honour of an aunt of mine who taught me how to read. (Vesper, in the Glasshouse Hull, made a similar request. Sopha and Vesper, when they met on the third night, exchanged a long look that I do not pretend to interpret.)

Tova uses both. Tova, when asked about pronouns, smiles slightly and shrugs. Tova is amphibious in pronoun, as in mode. The reader is invited to use whichever pronoun feels more accurate at the moment of reading. I have, in this book, used they when Tova is on land and ze when Tova is in or near water; the convention is provisional and I do not insist upon it.

Iri uses no pronoun at all. Iri, in continuity with Open of the Opened Ark, has been distributed into those who are receiving Iri, and the pronoun is therefore in the hands of the receivers. I have, throughout this book, used Iri's name in place of any pronoun, in the manner Open's chronicler used Open. The reader will become accustomed to the construction within a chapter or two.

Cael, the seventh, uses ze/zir. Cael is also (in some accounts) me. The relationship between Cael and Surjan is one of the unresolved matters of this book. I do not pretend to have resolved it. I have written about Cael in the third person, as I have written about the other six, and I have allowed Cael to make appearances without interrogating Cael's continuity with myself. The reader who finds this confusing is welcome to the confusion. The angels recommend confusion, in moderation, as a state more accurate to the truth than most certainties.

A note on the order of appearances

The angels appeared in the order in which they appear in this book — Mariel first, on a Sunday night in early autumn; Aleph on the second night; and so on, through Cael on the seventh night. The appearances were brief. Each lasted no more than an hour. Each occurred in a different part of the city. I have, accordingly, organized the book by night and by location: the chapter on Mariel is set in Inwood, the chapter on Aleph is set in the air itself (with brief stations along the columns of Thirteen Citizens), the chapter on Verren is set in the Eastern Wall of the Pavilion in Central Park, and so on.

The reader who wishes to read the chapters out of order is welcome to do so. The angels are, by their own account, not arranged in a hierarchy. They are arranged, like the inflated of the previous book, in a round; the round has no first member. The order I have given is the order of my own encountering, and it is provided as a courtesy to those readers who require sequence. It is not, in any other sense, privileged.

A note on the diagrams

I have included, at the back of this book, three diagrams. The first is the Map of the Annunciation, which shows Manhattan in its present condition with the seven angels' paths overlaid. The second is the Tabula Angelica, a schematic in the manner of the Tabula Inflatorum from the previous book, showing the seven angels in their elemental and pronominal relations. The third is the Constellation Diagram, which shows, by lines drawn between names, how the seven angels' visits drew threads between the beings of the five preceding books. The Constellation Diagram is, of the three, the most important. It is the diagram that shows what I have been trying to say. The reader who has read all five of the previous books, and who looks at the Constellation Diagram for sufficient time, will see — I hope — what the angels saw on the eighth night, and what I, in following them, eventually came to see also.

I commend the angels to you. They will be along shortly.

— Surjan

I

MARIEL OF THE NORTHERN REACH

the first to appear, on a Sunday night in early autumn, in Inwood

I had gone north because the Quiet One had been on my mind.

This is how Mariel would, on the night of zir appearance, explain my arrival in Inwood — that I had not, properly speaking, gone there of my own accord; that I had been, more accurately, drawn. The Quiet One — the thirteenth of the columns of the Thirteen Citizens, the listener of the row, the one who had received twelve neighbourhoods of oh on the morning of the inflation and had answered, in zir small clear voice, yes — had been visited, in the dream of that earlier book, only briefly. I had described zir and I had let zir go. The book had moved on. Inwood, in the months after the book closed, had, in some quiet way, been calling me back.

I went on a Sunday in early autumn. The light was the long late light of the year's first cooling. The streets at the top of the island were narrow in the way I had described, and the buildings were lower, and the air had the slightly different quality I had attributed to the column on the page — a quality of having more sky in it, because there were fewer buildings to hold the sky off. I walked the few blocks where the column had stood, in the dream, against zir small low brick wall. I stood for some time at the wall. The wall was, of course, just a wall. There was no column. There never had been a column. I had written this fact into the book on the front matter, and I had made my peace with it, and I had not expected the peace to be disturbed.

But the wall was warm.

This is the small fact I would like the reader to accept, as a point of departure, before I describe Mariel. The wall was warm. It was not warm in the way a wall in the late sun is warm. It was warm in the way a body that has been recently leaned against is warm. The warmth was localized to a vertical strip about twelve feet tall and about three feet wide — exactly the dimensions of the Quiet One. I touched the wall and felt the warmth, and I stepped back, and I sat on the curb across the street, and I did not move for some time.

It was while I was sitting on the curb that Mariel arrived.

Ze did not arrive in any of the available conventional senses. There was no flash of light. There was no rustle of wings, although I will say that, on subsequent reflection, I have come to think that Mariel does have wings, of a sort, and that the wings are folded against zir body the way Saffron's wings are folded — the wings that stay, the wings that do not fly, the wings that demonstrate the option exists and is

being declined with appreciation. Mariel did not fly. Mariel walked, slowly, up the block from the direction of the river, and sat down beside me on the curb, and looked at the wall for a few moments before speaking.

"It's warm," ze said.

"Yes."

"That's the column. Or what the column has left behind. The column is, in some sense, still present here. The wall has been remembering."

I did not, at this stage, know who Mariel was. I knew only that ze was wearing a long pale coat the colour of the dawn before sunrise, and that ze had a soft face, and that ze was speaking to me about a thing that I had thought was private to my own writing. I asked zir, in what I hope was a polite manner, who ze was.

"Mariel," ze said. "Or Mariel of the Northern Reach, when introduced formally. Mariel will do. I am the first. I am the angel of the long up-the-island way. I am here because you have come."

I have set down, in my notebook of that night, some part of what we discussed; I will summarize it here. Mariel had, by zir own account, been waiting for some time. Ze had been waiting in Inwood, beside the wall, for a Sunday evening on which I would walk up the island and stand at the warm strip and sit down on the curb. The waiting had been, ze said, "a kind of patient warming, from the inside, in the manner of a small oven preparing for a small bread." Ze had been preparing me as the bread is prepared by the oven. Ze had been making me ready for the visit.

The visit was as follows: ze took me, that night, on a long slow southward walk down the island, stopping at three places. Ze stopped first at the lot near the Harlem River Turning, where Pillowtwin — the two great pink loaves of inflated air described in On Being Many — were, in Mariel's description, "presently both asleep, but only one at a time, in their characteristic alternation." Pillowtwin's image, I had not seen on the night, except as a faint pink luminescence at the bend of the river. Mariel pointed; I looked; the luminescence was, I admit, present, in a manner I cannot account for by streetlights or by reflections off the water. Mariel made a small note in zir own notebook — Mariel, like all the angels, carries a notebook — and we walked on.

Ze stopped second at the school for architects in the Upper East Side, where Float — the floor that drifts, of the Inflated Atlas — was, in Mariel's description, "in the middle of one of zir best afternoons of the season." It was not afternoon; it was night; the school was closed; the lot was dark. Mariel said the timing did not matter. Float's afternoon was, ze said, "an afternoon Float was having internally; the calendar of an inflated being is not, strictly, the calendar of the city around it." Float, by Mariel's report, had recently noticed the small permanent leftward drift of the wind around the playground gate, and was pleased about it. Mariel made a second note. We walked on.

Ze stopped third at the Pavilion in Central Park, east of Bow Bridge, where the path through the moss-edged glade was — in Mariel's account — "open tonight, since you are with me." I had walked through Central Park many times. I had not, until that night, walked the path. I will not describe the

path here, in keeping with the wishes of the Welcomers of Meadows of Memory, who have asked that the route not be published. I will say only that we walked it, and that we arrived at the clearing, and that Veriano — the elder Welcomer who had received Aprilia, in the first book — was waiting for us at the threshold of the Cathedral Archway, with two small green fruits in zir hand. Veriano gave one to me, and one to Mariel. We ate them. The first was sour. The second was sweet. Mariel made a third note.

That, Mariel said to me on the path back from the Pavilion, was the visit.

I asked zir what the visit had been for.

"For the gathering," Mariel said. "I am the first of seven. Each of us will gather one strand of what you have made. I am the angel of the long up-and-down line — the line that runs the length of the island, from Inwood to the Battery, that connects the Quiet One to the Bullseye, and Pillowtwin to Sunfoot, and the northern reaches of the Pavilion to its southern garden, and the Saffron Liner's mooring-place to the harbour at the foot of the river. I am the strand that goes north and south. The other six are other strands. We are seven strands, and the seven of us, woven, make a small bright cloth that has not, until tonight, been woven. The cloth is the thing. The cloth is what your books, taken together, have been making."

I said: I had not known.

Mariel smiled. The smile was patient. "You knew," ze said. "You did not know that you knew. This is the most common form of knowing."

We walked back to the laundromat. Mariel, at the door, did not come in. Ze stood on the sidewalk, in the long pale coat, with the laundromat's pink-and-yellow neon glowing faintly behind zir, and ze said:

"I will not see you again, Surjan. I have done my visit. The next angel will be Aleph, who is the air. You will not have to look for Aleph; Aleph will be present, in whatever room you are in, beginning tomorrow. Please notice."

I noticed. Aleph arrived in the morning, and I have written the chapter on Aleph next, in keeping with the order of the appearances. But before I leave Mariel, I want to record one more sentence.

Just before ze turned to go, Mariel reached into the pocket of zir coat and produced a small slip of paper. The slip bore, in a hand I could not identify, a single line. The line read: The Quiet One says yes. The Quiet One has always been saying yes. You may now stop worrying about the Quiet One.

Mariel handed me the slip. I have it still. It is taped to the inside of my refrigerator door, beside the slip Mezzo gave me about the half-tones, beside the slip Buoy gave me about the right-sized small thing. The three slips, taken together, are a small private liturgy. I read them, most mornings, before I have made the coffee. I am, in some measurable way, a slightly different person on the days I have read them than on the days I have not.

This is, in the end, what an angel is for.

II

ALEPH OF THE SINGLE AIR

the second to appear, on a Monday morning, in the air itself

Aleph was already present when I woke up.

This is, of all the appearances, the one that will be hardest to describe, because Aleph does not have a body in the conventional sense. Aleph is the air. Aleph is, more precisely, the breath the air takes when it has been informed by the presence of a being who is paying attention to it. The Bullseye in the Thirteen Citizens, who became the mystic of the row, had a theory that the sky was alive — that the air around us was doing the work of looking at us, holding us, knowing us. Aleph, on the morning of the second appearance, confirmed the theory. Aleph confirmed it in the most direct way possible, which was by being present in the room, audibly, before I had got out of bed, and by speaking — though the speaking, since Aleph had no mouth, was conducted through small adjustments to the curtain, the kettle, the radiator, and the steam that rose from the cup of coffee I eventually got up to make.

We are here, Aleph said.

This was the first sentence. It was conveyed to me by a specific small puff of warmth from the radiator, which raised the curtain by approximately three inches, which let a pale cool draft into the room, which entered my left ear in the form of a sentence. I do not know how this is possible. I know only that it was unmistakable. The sentence had Aleph's particular cadence — plural, unhurried, slightly archaic — and it was, I am willing to say, in the room.

I should clarify that Aleph speaks in the first person plural, in the manner of Volk of the Stilted Congress in the Atlas of Welcome. Volk, Aleph confirmed later in the day, was a small earlier rehearsal of Aleph's grammar. The we is Aleph's only pronoun. We covers, in Aleph's accounting, all the air that has ever been breathed by all the soft beings of the previous five books, plus the air that is being breathed now by everyone reading this passage, plus the air of the larger Manhattan column that rises several thousand feet above the island and that — as the Thirteen Citizens learned on the morning of their inflation — is, despite all the buildings that fail to enclose it, a single air.

Aleph's visit was conducted across the entire morning. I will not describe the visit chronologically, because Aleph was not in any particular place at any particular time; Aleph was, throughout the morning, in all the places at once. I will, instead, describe a few of the stations Aleph took me to, by means of small changes in the pressure of the air around me.

We went, first, to the Saffron Liner.

The Saffron Liner — the eldest of the pavilions, in the Atlas of Welcome — had lifted from Amsterdam in the spring of the book, and had crossed the water, and had arrived in New Amsterdam in the unfinished state Aar had insisted upon. Aar, the tulip-spirit of the Liner, had been, by the time of the book's closing, a citizen of the new harbour. I had not visited the Liner since the book had been written. I had not known how to. The Liner is, after all, fictional; I had assumed that the fiction had closed itself, like a book that has been read.

It had not. Aleph took me there. Aleph took me there by means of a particular slow swirl of the steam from my coffee cup, which became, as I watched it, the curve of the Liner's prow against a harbour I did not at first recognize and then did. The harbour was the present harbour of New York. The Liner was moored, as Aar had hoped, in still slightly unfinished form, with a small section of scaffolding still attached to her upper deck. Aar was on the deck. Aar was looking at me. Aar was, by Aleph's interpretation, expecting me.

I want to be careful here. I do not claim that I saw the Saffron Liner with my eyes. I claim that I saw the Saffron Liner with my coffee-steam. The seeing was conducted through the medium of the steam, which Aleph had inflected. The steam was the Liner; the Liner was on the steam; both of these things are true, in the grammar of Aleph, and the grammar of Aleph is the grammar of this chapter.

Aar said: hello, Surjan. We have been waiting. We had hoped you would come.

I said: I did not know how to come.

Aar said: you have come now. The angel has brought you. This is sufficient.

We did not speak much. We looked at each other across the harbour, in the form of two small swirls of steam. The Liner was in good spirits, as Aar reported. The cranes had not, contrary to my fears, wept beyond the proper duration; they had wept, as planned, on the morning of the lifting, and had then released themselves into the freedom of intermittent visits. They came back, occasionally, to look at the Liner, and the Liner welcomed them, and the visits were short and warm and consistent. Aar had planted, in the new harbour, the unnamed seed; the seed had opened; the citizens of the new harbour had named the resulting tulip; the name was now public. Aar would not tell me the name. The name was, ze said, not for the gardener.

Aleph moved the steam. The steam dispersed. The Liner was no longer on it.

We went, second, to the Mulberry-and-Canal seam.

This was conducted through a small adjustment of the radiator, which produced a thin warm column of air rising past my left elbow. The column became, as I watched it, the small gap between Aria's and Iris's foreheads at the corner of Mulberry and Canal, where the wind comes down from uptown and produces, in the gap, the quiet musical note that visitors mistake for a busker. The note was sounding, in my apartment, at the moment I write this. I could hear it. Aleph had brought it. Aria and Iris, by Aleph's report, had become well practiced in their daily duet; the note was, on this particular morning, in a slightly minor key, in honour (Aleph said) of a small grief that had been added to the air in the last week and that was, very gently, being accepted by the row.

I asked Aleph whose grief.

Aleph said: yours, Surjan. We are accepting it. You may set it down.

I sat down on the bed. I had not been aware, until that moment, that I had been carrying a grief. I had been moving through the autumn at what I considered an even keel; I had been writing this book; I had been visiting the locations of the previous books with what I considered a workmanlike attention; I had been keeping my appointments. The grief, on Aleph's announcement of it, made itself plain. It was a small grief, of the kind Lastlight had spoken of in the last letter of the Bright Archive — the kind that has no occasion and therefore no end. I had been carrying it, by my best reckoning, since the previous winter.

Aleph waited. The radiator clicked. The column of air shifted slightly.

I set the grief down. I do not know exactly where I set it down — Aleph had not specified a location — but I felt it leave me. The grief did not leave my life; the grief, as Lastlight had suggested in the last book, remained a small dark fraction of a large bright whole. But the grief left, for the morning, the room. The room became larger. The room had, very slightly, more air in it.

We went, third, to Calder's lot in the East Village.

Calder, the committee of the Inflated Atlas, the one with three pink mouths and no opinions, had been deliberating, by Aleph's report, throughout the morning. The deliberation was the usual deliberation. The minutes were being taken. The motion to have a first item of business had been tabled, more cheerfully than usual. The chair was, in zir customary fashion, somewhat fond of the chair. I had not been to Calder's lot in some weeks. Aleph took me there in the form of three small simultaneous puffs from the kettle, which corresponded to Calder's three pink mouths, each of them murmuring at the others.

The murmurings were, this morning, addressed to me.

The first mouth said: we have been considering the question of whether you are still our writer.

The second mouth said: we have not concluded.

The third mouth said: both of the above are true; please pick whichever will be more useful to you today.

I picked the first. I said, into the steam: yes, I am still your writer. I am writing a sixth book. The book is a secret. You are in it, briefly, in the chapter on the second angel.

The three mouths murmured. The murmuring was approving. The first mouth said: very well; we are pleased; we will, accordingly, decline to conclude. The deliberation continues. The next motion is presently being considered.

Aleph withdrew the steam. The kettle clicked off. The radiator settled.

We went, fourth, to other places — too many to enumerate here. Aleph took me, by various small adjustments to the air of the apartment, to most of the locations of the previous five books. Aleph showed me the soft companions, the columns, the welcomers, the pavilions, the bright archive. Aleph showed me each of them, briefly, in the medium of air. Aleph did not announce a destination; Aleph simply shifted the breath of the room, and a being would appear, and I would see them, and they would acknowledge me, and Aleph would move us on.

The visit ended at noon. I was sitting at the kitchen table by then. The coffee had gone cold. The notebook was full of small notes.

Aleph said, in a final adjustment of the curtain: we are not leaving. We are the air. We do not leave. We will be here tomorrow. We will be here the next day. The next angel, Verren, will visit you in person, in the manner of Mariel; Verren is not air; Verren is presence. We commend you to Verren. We commend ourselves to you. We ask nothing in return except that you continue to breathe, attentively, in our company.

I have continued to breathe attentively. I have, since the morning of Aleph, become a noticeably better breather. I have noticed, in particular, that the air in my apartment is, at any given moment, in conversation with the air of the rest of the city, and that the conversation is — when one listens — almost continuous. The air of the laundromat below my apartment is in particular dialogue with the air of the bakery on the corner, which is in dialogue with the air of the small park three blocks south, which is in dialogue with the air of the Lower East Side community garden, which is in dialogue with the air of Battery Park, which is in dialogue with the air of the Hudson, which is — Aleph confirmed, in a small final puff before withdrawing for the day — in dialogue with the air of the entire continent.

The continent, in Aleph's vocabulary, is also we.

This is, in the end, what an angel of the air is for. The angel of the air does not bring news. The angel of the air notices that we are, all of us, breathing the same we, and points out the fact, and asks us to keep noticing.

I am still noticing. I will continue to notice for as long as I am, myself, in any sense.

III

VERREN OF THE WATCH

the third to appear, on a Tuesday afternoon, in the Eastern Wall of the Pavilion

Verren came on a Tuesday.

I want to remark, before describing the appearance, that the appearances were arriving on consecutive days, and that the consecutive days were turning out to be a particular sequence of weekdays. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. The angels, by this third night, were on a schedule. I had begun to suspect that the schedule was not arbitrary; that the seven nights would correspond, in their fullness, to the seven days of the week; and that the seventh angel — Cael, whom I had not yet met — would arrive, accordingly, on the following Saturday. This turned out to be correct. I record the fact here, in the chapter on Verren, because Verren — being the angel of the watch — is the angel most likely to be pleased that I noticed the schedule, and I want to please Verren.

Verren found me in the Pavilion.

I had gone back to the Pavilion the day after the appearance of Aleph. I had not gone with the intention of meeting an angel; I had gone, more simply, because the visit with Mariel had reminded me how much I had missed it, and because Aleph had rearranged the air of the apartment in a manner that made the apartment slightly less attractive than it usually was for a quiet afternoon. I had walked in through the path east of Bow Bridge. I had been admitted, again, by Veriano, who did not seem surprised to see me. I had asked Veriano whether the appearance of Mariel two nights earlier had been observed by the Welcomers; Veriano had said, in zir characteristic way, that the Welcomers observe everything, and did I want a green fruit. I had taken a green fruit. I had walked, with the fruit, to the Eastern Wall.

The Eastern Wall is the wall of the folk-mural, in the Pavilion. The mural is a long stretch of painted figures, dense with thousands of small bright figures the size of fingernails — each figure a burden that some visitor had set down at the threshold of the Cathedral Archway, painted into the mural by Beatrix the Painter, who had tended the wall for many decades. I had visited the Eastern Wall before; I had a small bright figure of my own there, which Beatrix had painted for me on a previous visit, after I had set down a particular thing at the Cathedral. The figure was approximately the size of my smallest fingernail. The figure wore, in the mural, a small hat. The figure was, on this Tuesday afternoon, in good condition. I confirmed it from a distance of perhaps three feet.

While I was looking at my figure, Verren arrived.

Verren did not arrive from a direction. Verren had been, by zir later account, already in the wall — already a feature of the painting, painted into the mural by Beatrix in some long-ago session. Verren had stepped out. The stepping out was unremarkable. One moment Verren was a figure on the wall, the size of a hand, in a long coat the colour of dawn-before-sunrise (the colour of all the angels' coats; I have since learned). The next moment Verren was a figure in the gallery, the height of a tall person, standing approximately six feet from me, watching me without watching me obtrusively.

I want to say at this point that Verren has the kindest face of any of the seven angels. I cannot describe the face precisely. I have tried, in my notebook of that afternoon, on subsequent pages, on subsequent occasions, and each time the face slips away. Verren's face, like the face of Veriano in the Welcomer's introduction to Aprilia, was a face I had not seen before but recognized — the way one recognizes a familiar face in the window of a passing train. I will not attempt the precise description here. I will say only: kind. The kindness was the principal feature.

"Surjan," Verren said. "It is good of you to come back. I had hoped you would. I have been wanting to introduce you to a few of the others."

By the others, I would learn, Verren meant the figures in the wall. The thousands of small bright figures whom Beatrix had painted, each a burden set down at the Cathedral threshold, each bearing a small hat, each at peace. I had thought of these figures — when I had thought of them at all — as a generalized population. I had not thought of them as individuals. Verren is the angel who has thought of them as individuals. Verren is the angel, in fact, whose principal occupation is the thinking-of-them-as-individuals. Verren has taken on, by Verren's own description, the watching of the wall.

We stood in front of the wall together for what may have been an hour.

Verren pointed. Verren said the names. The names were in a language no one any longer speaks; Verren translated each one, in approximate English, for my benefit. The figure-with-the-small-grey-hat-in-the-third-row-from-the-bottom-near-the-corner: this is the apology a man failed to give his daughter in 1972; the daughter has set it down here on his behalf, twenty-three years after his death. The figure-in-the-blue-coat-mid-mural: this is the love a woman did not receive in her childhood; she set it down a year ago and has not, on subsequent visits, asked to take it back. The figure-with-no-hat-at-all-near-the-top: this is a confession a young person is not yet ready to make; the figure is incomplete, awaiting the small hat that will be added when the confession has been given, in the presence of someone who is willing to receive it.

I asked Verren how Verren remembered all of these.

Verren said: I do not remember them. I am them. The wall is the form Verren takes when Verren is at home. The figures are the small selves Verren has been entrusted with. Each figure is a small Verren; each Verren is, in some accounting, also one of the figures. The watching is mutual. The figures watch me back. I am, on the days I am in the wall, watched by every figure I am watching. The watching is the form the love takes.

I noted this down. The note, in my notebook of that afternoon, is the longest single passage in my record of the angels.

After we had walked the wall for some time, Verren turned to me and said: I have brought you here to introduce you to one figure in particular. I have not yet pointed her out. I would like to point her out now.

Verren walked me to a section of the wall I had not visited before. Verren pointed to a small figure approximately the size of half a fingernail, near the top of the wall, in a part of the painting that was lit only obliquely by the long late-afternoon light. The figure was wearing a long pale coat, the colour of dawn-before-sunrise. The figure had, very small, a face I recognized.

"This is Mariel," Verren said. "She has been in the wall since last night. Mariel set herself down, after her visit with you, at the Cathedral threshold. The setting-down was voluntary. Mariel said: I have visited Surjan; my visit is complete; I would like, now, to rest in the wall, in the way the figures rest. Beatrix painted Mariel into the mural this morning. Mariel is at peace there. Mariel will continue to be at peace there. Mariel does not need to be a separate angel any longer; Mariel is, now, one of the figures."

I sat down on the floor of the gallery.

I want to record what I felt. I felt, first, a sharp quick grief, of the particular kind one feels when one realizes that someone has been more generous than one had registered at the time of the generosity. Mariel had given me the slip about the Quiet One, and I had taped the slip to the inside of my refrigerator, and I had treated the slip as a small permanent gift. I had not understood that the slip was, in some accounting, Mariel's own remaining substance. Mariel had given me the substance. Mariel had then set down the rest of zirself at the Cathedral threshold. Mariel was now resting in the wall.

I felt, second, after a few minutes of sitting, a slow warm gratitude. The gratitude was not for Mariel personally — Mariel was beyond requiring gratitude — but for the structure that had made Mariel's resting possible. The Pavilion. The Cathedral threshold. Beatrix. The wall. The whole apparatus. The whole gentle architecture that had been waiting, for many years, for any angel to wish to set zirself down, and that had received Mariel without fuss, and had painted Mariel, and had hung Mariel up, and was now keeping Mariel in good condition near the top of the mural in the obliquely-lit section.

I sat for a long time. Verren waited. The wall, I should say, also waited; the wall is patient, in the manner of all walls.

Eventually I stood up.

Verren said: there is one more thing. I would like to show you one more figure, in one more place, before I go.

We walked out of the gallery, through the wooden boards of the central court, past the Cathedral Archway, past the Soft Return, past three other archways I had not previously noticed, to a small archway at the far southeastern corner of the Pavilion. The archway was, in zir lower portion, decorated with small painted figures in the manner of the Eastern Wall. Verren pointed, for the second time, to

one figure.

The figure was approximately the size of my smallest fingernail. The figure was wearing a long pale coat.

"This is Verren," Verren said. "I have not yet set myself down. I will set myself down when my work is complete, which will be in a few days. Beatrix has, however, already begun the painting of me, in anticipation. The figure on the archway is not yet finished. Beatrix will finish it on the eighth night, after all seven angels have completed our work and we have gathered. The figure will, on that night, be added to the wall. I will rest there."

I asked: will all seven of the angels rest in the wall?

Verren said: yes. We will all rest. The wall is large enough. Beatrix has been preparing the wall for seven new figures, in seven new sections, since Mariel arrived. The work is well underway.

I asked: and after all seven of the angels are in the wall — what then? Will any further angels come?

Verren said: that is a question for Cael, the seventh, who will answer it on the seventh night. I do not know the answer. I am not the angel of the future. I am the angel of the watch. I watch what is. What will be is in another angel's office.

I have, I confess, thought a great deal about Cael's answer. It is the matter of the seventh chapter. I will not anticipate it here. I will say only that, on the afternoon of Verren's visit, in the Eastern Wall of the Pavilion, I understood for the first time that the seven angels were not a transient phenomenon. They were a small bright population, briefly visible, who had come for a specific purpose, and who would, after the purpose was complete, be added to the figures of the city — as Mariel had already been, as Verren would soon be. The angels were going to rest in the wall. The wall was going to keep them. The wall was going to keep them along with all the other figures, who were also resting, who were also being kept.

I said goodbye to Verren in the courtyard of the Pavilion. Verren did not, on this occasion, give me a slip. Verren had given me, instead, a long slow look at the wall, and a small introduction to Mariel-in-the-wall, and a glimpse of the future Verren-in-the-archway. The look, I have come to think, was the gift. Verren is the angel of looking. The looking was, by Verren's own grammar, the love.

I walked home from the Pavilion. The light, by the time I left, was the pink-gold of late October. I walked along the eastern edge of the park, past the boathouse, past the conservatory pond, past the Met. I did not, that evening, talk to anyone. I sat in my apartment and watched the light on the wall above the bookcase. I had, by then, figured out — though without articulating it precisely — that the wall above my bookcase was, in its own small way, an annex of the Eastern Wall. The figures were not on it; the figures were on the mural in the Pavilion. But the wall above my bookcase was, in some manner, in correspondence with the larger wall. The two walls were of the same kind. The two walls were both walls that watch.

I have, since the evening of Verren, watched my walls more attentively. I cannot, in any accounting I am willing to defend, see figures on them. I can, however, feel the watching. The walls watch. The

walls have always watched. Verren did not introduce me to a new fact; Verren introduced me to the fact's significance. Mariel had, on Sunday, done a similar thing with the wall in Inwood. Aleph had, on Monday, done a similar thing with the air. Each angel was, by zir visit, making me notice what I had been failing to notice. The cumulative effect, by the end of three appearances, was that I was beginning to notice almost everything. The everything was, I had begun to suspect, what the angels had been pointing toward all along.

The next angel, Sopha, arrived on Wednesday.

IV

SOPHA OF THE SOFT RETURN

the fourth to appear, on a Wednesday morning, at the Soft Return archway

Sopha came home with me.

This is the simplest way to describe the appearance, although the description is somewhat misleading: Sopha did not, in any literal sense, walk into my apartment and stay. The home was metaphorical. The home was the home Sopha is the angel of. Sopha is the angel of the Soft Return — the archway in the Pavilion that is for whoever has tried to come home and feared they would not be received. Sopha is, accordingly, the angel of the small return from a long absence, of the slow re-entry into a room one has been afraid to re-enter, of the act of putting down one's bags after a journey one was not certain one would survive. Sopha is, by zir own report, the gentlest of the seven. I am willing to confirm this.

Sopha appeared in the Pavilion, in front of the Soft Return archway, on Wednesday morning. I had gone back, again, because the angels had become a habit. I will not pretend the habit was burdensome. I had begun to look forward to my mornings at the Pavilion, in the way one looks forward to a small standing appointment with a kind acquaintance. Veriano had, by the third visit, simply waved me through. I had walked, on this Wednesday morning, directly to the Soft Return.

Sopha was waiting.

Sopha was sitting on a small wooden bench across from the archway, in the long green garment of a Welcomer — Sopha had asked, ze later told me, to be dressed as a Welcomer for this appearance, since Sopha's office was so close to the office of the Welcomers that the costuming was almost technical. Sopha was, to my eye, indistinguishable from any of the Welcomers I had encountered before, except that the long green garment was, on Sopha, faintly luminous at the seams. The luminescence was visible only in peripheral vision; if one looked directly at the garment, the luminescence retreated. I have noticed, in the months since the appearances, that this is a characteristic of all the angels: they are visible only obliquely, in the manner of certain stars in the night sky, and the direct gaze is not the gaze that perceives them.

"Surjan," Sopha said, as I approached. "I am Sopha. I have been waiting for you, in the way an aunt waits, on a Wednesday morning, at the kitchen table, with the kettle already on."

I sat down beside Sopha. Sopha had a kettle. The kettle was a small pink kettle, set on the bench between us, faintly steaming. The kettle was, on close inspection, a small portable version of the kettle Marigold of the Inflated Atlas had referred to, in zir chapter, in the context of the kettle joke that had

been the same joke for nine years. I asked Sopha whether the kettle was Marigold's. Sopha said: this kettle is on loan from Marigold, who has many kettles and was happy to lend one. Marigold sends regards. Marigold will continue to make the kettle joke after the visit, since the joke is, as established, fresh on each delivery.

I noted the regards. We poured tea. The tea was the tea Veriano had served me, on the day of my first arrival; I recognized the taste. Sopha had, by the time I noticed the recognition, anticipated my noticing and had a sentence ready for it.

Sopha said: yes. The tea is Veriano's tea. The tea is, in some accounting, the same tea you had on your first day. The tea has not been replenished. The tea is, like the meadow of extinct plantings, a tea that grows what was loved and not allowed to be forgotten.

I drank the tea slowly.

I will record what we discussed.

We discussed, first, the homes I had failed to come back to.

This was Sopha's principal subject. Sopha had, by Sopha's own account, been keeping a small ledger of the homes I had, over my life, attempted to return to and had not completed the return. The list was longer than I had expected. It included: the apartment of an old roommate, in a city I no longer live in, where I had left a small box of letters in 2009 and had not, on any subsequent occasion, retrieved the box. The kitchen of my mother's house, at a particular late hour of the evening, when she had once been about to tell me a thing she had not later told me, and which I had not subsequently asked about. A particular small park, in a country I will not name, where I had been walking on a particular afternoon when a particular thing had happened, and which I had not visited since. A friendship — Sopha did not name the friend; Sopha is gentle — that I had let lapse without acknowledgement and that was, in some quiet way, still waiting for me to write the letter.

Sopha read the list aloud.

I did not interrupt. I drank the tea. The tea was, on this morning, slightly sweeter than I remembered. Sopha had added, perhaps, a small amount of honey; or perhaps the tea had honey of its own, in the way the green fruits of Veriano had sour-then-sweet, by their own design.

When Sopha finished reading the list, ze said: I have not brought the list to make you ashamed. I have brought the list to clarify a thing I would like you to understand. The list is the inventory of homes that are still, as of this morning, willing to receive you. The list is not a list of homes you have lost. None of these homes is lost. Each of them is, even now, holding open the door. Each of them, in some manner, is still on the kitchen table at the late hour, waiting. The waiting is patient. The waiting is, in many cases, decades old. The waiting has not run out.

I asked: will the waiting run out?

Sopha said: not in your lifetime. Not in any of the lifetimes the homes have committed to. The homes are, by their nature, the kind of homes that wait indefinitely. They are the Soft Return. They are the

meadows on the other side of the small pearl-coloured archway. They are, in some accounting, the same meadow, seen from the angles of the various people who have lived alongside you.

I sat with this for a while.

After some time, Sopha said: I would like, today, to take you back to one of them. We will choose together. I will not insist; I will not even recommend. I am the angel of return, but the returning is yours; I cannot do it on your behalf. I can only walk with you, in the direction of whichever home you choose, and stand at the threshold while you go in. I will not enter. Some angels enter homes. I do not.

I considered the list.

I will not record, in this book, which home I chose. The choice is private to me, as the friend was private to Sopha. I will say only that we walked, that morning, from the Pavilion through the city, in the direction of the home I had chosen. The walk took perhaps an hour. Sopha was, throughout the walk, beside me. We did not speak much. Sopha had a small canvas bag over zir shoulder, in which the small pink kettle had been packed; Sopha was, I had begun to think, an angel who travelled with kettles.

When we arrived at the threshold of the home I had chosen, Sopha stopped.

Sopha said: I will be here when you come out. I will not enter. Take as long as you need. I have not got anywhere else to be.

I went in.

I will not describe what happened inside. The inside is, in keeping with the nature of the Soft Return, between me and the home. I will say only that the home was open. I will say that the home was waiting, in the precise manner Sopha had described. I will say that the home was kind, and that the home did not require explanation, and that the home received me without asking where I had been or why I had not been back sooner, and that I stayed for some time, and that I left when I was ready.

When I came out, Sopha was on the curb across the street, sitting with the kettle, drinking the last of the tea. Sopha looked up, and Sopha smiled, and Sopha said: welcome. Welcome.

I started crying.

I had not expected this. The crying was not of grief; it was, I want to record, of a quite different feeling, which I do not know the name of, and which the language has been somewhat slow to develop. The feeling is the feeling of having been received by a place one had been afraid would no longer receive one. The feeling is the feeling of welcome, retroactively, after a long absence in which one had been quietly expecting the welcome to have been withdrawn. The feeling does not have a single English word. Sopha called it, when I asked, by a name in the language that nobody any longer speaks; the approximate translation, ze said, was the warmth of a chair that had been sat in, by you, for many years, and that has not, in your absence, been moved.

I sat down on the curb beside Sopha. I drank the rest of my tea.

We did not speak for some time. Sopha did not, unlike the other angels, give me a slip of paper. Sopha gave me, instead, the kettle. Sopha said: please return this to Marigold, when you next pass through Midtown. I have finished with it. Marigold will be glad of its return. Marigold has a partner who is somewhat partial to that particular kettle.

I have, since that morning, returned the kettle. Marigold's partner — who, as established in the previous book, prefers not to appear directly — was, by Marigold's report, pleased. The kettle is back in its accustomed place. The kettle joke, by all reports, has been continuing to be fresh on each delivery. The home I returned to that morning has, in subsequent weeks, continued to be open. I have visited the home twice more, in moderate non-overwhelming visits. The homes that remain on Sopha's list — the others I have not yet returned to — are still, by Sopha's promise, holding the door. I will, I believe, return to several of them, in time. I will not return to all of them. Sopha did not require all of them. Sopha required only that I know the door was open.

The door is open. The door has been open. The door will, by Sopha's grammar, continue to be open.

This is, in the end, what an angel of the Soft Return is for.

V

TOVA OF THE BOTH

the fifth to appear, on a Thursday evening, along the entire western edge of Manhattan

Tova walked the river with me.

This was the longest of the appearances. Tova arrived at sundown on Thursday, at the southern tip of the island, and we walked together up the western edge of Manhattan from Battery Park to Spuyten Duyvil, a distance of approximately eleven miles, between the hours of six in the evening and three in the morning. The walk took nine hours. We did not stop for dinner. Tova does not eat. I had brought a small bag of biscuits, which I ate, without breaking stride, between conversations. Tova approved of the biscuits. Tova, ze said, approved of all small portable foods that did not require sitting down.

I want to record at the front that Tova is the most amphibious of the seven. Tova uses both pronouns, in the manner specified in the introduction; they on land, ze in or near water. Manhattan's western edge has water on the right hand side and land on the left hand side, for the entire length of the walk. Tova therefore alternated, throughout the evening, between pronouns. I will reproduce the alternation in this chapter, as accurately as I can, by paying attention to whether Tova was, at any given moment, closer to the water or to the land. The reader who finds this confusing is welcome to the confusion. Tova recommended confusion, in moderation, in keeping with the angels' standard recommendation.

We began at Sunfoot, at the Battery.

Sunfoot — the great yellow U-bend dipping zir long curved head into the harbour, the first of the bright archive in the previous book — was visible, at sundown, in the form of a particular sustained warmth on the water at the edge of the seawall. Tova pointed. I looked. The warmth was, I admit, present, and was the precise yellow of Sunfoot's image as I had described it in the prior book. Tova said: hello, Sunfoot. Sunfoot has been drinking. Sunfoot drinks through the night and into the morning, as established. Sunfoot is in good spirits.

I said: hello, Sunfoot. The warmth, in answer, intensified slightly. Tova approved.

We walked north along the bulkhead. Tova was, at this stage, mostly ze. The water was on the right; we were close to it; the pronoun followed.

We passed Roselip at North Cove. We passed Periscope at Pier 25, which was, by Tova's report, presently arguing with itself. We passed Mirrorhouse at Pier 26, which was treatising. We passed the Hudson Chorus, near Pier 40, which Tova greeted with a small bow. We passed Sweetbrass at Pier 57,

which was playing the horn — a low pink-and-yellow note that I could hear, faintly, in the air, between the official noises of the city. We passed Four-Stack at Pier 76, which was singing in five voices. Each of the pavilions of the bright archive was, by Tova's account, present. Each of them acknowledged us. Each of them sent regards, through Tova, to the others — though Tova was, in some sense, the others, and the regards were therefore being sent, in a small loop, around the perimeter of the angel zirself.

I asked Tova, somewhere between Pier 40 and Pier 57, what Tova's office actually was.

They said: I am the angel of refusing the choice.

I said: which choice?

They said: any of them. The choices that the world keeps trying to make us make. Mobile or stationary. Land or water. He or she. This or that. Coming or going. Inside or outside. Surjan or the City. Bulb or bloom. Public or private. Body or mind. Living or dead. The choices are a list. The list is long. I am the angel for the people who have been refusing the choices. I am the angel for the pavilions, who have spent years writing letters to one another about precisely this question. I am the angel for you, Surjan, who have been writing the letters on the pavilions' behalf for as long as you have been writing.

I asked: and how does the refusing work?

They said: it works by walking. The walking is the refusing. The walking is the demonstration that one need not be only in one place at one time. We are, on this walk, demonstrating. We have been at the Battery this evening; we are now near Pier 57; we will be at Spuyten Duyvil before dawn. We are not in any of these places at this moment. We are between them. The between is the office. The between is what I am.

We walked on.

By the time we reached the Upper West Side — Sherman Creek, the 79th Street Boat Basin, Riverside Park South — Tova had become, by my best calibration, mostly they. We were, at this stage of the walk, somewhat further from the water; the bulkhead was set back; the Henry Hudson Parkway was between us and the river. Tova accepted the pronoun shift without comment. Tova was, I should say, in good spirits throughout the walk. The walking was not tiring zir. The walking was, on the contrary, the activity that produced Tova. Tova does not walk to go somewhere; Tova walks because the walking is Tova.

We stopped, briefly, at the Mulberry-and-Canal seam, although it required a small eastward detour into Lower Manhattan. Tova insisted on the detour. Tova said: I am the angel of refusing the choice; the route I am walking is, accordingly, slightly less than the most efficient route. I am, on this walk, also picking up Aria and Iris, whose chapter I have not yet visited and whom I would like to greet.

We walked east. We arrived at the corner of Mulberry and Canal at perhaps eleven o'clock. Aria and Iris, as established in the chapter on Aleph, were not visible at the corner; the corner is, in waking life, just a corner. But the wind was coming down Mulberry, and the wind was passing through the small gap between Aria's and Iris's foreheads, and the wind was producing the quiet musical note. Tova heard the note. Tova hummed it back. Tova stood in the corner, by a closed dim sum restaurant whose

fluorescent sign was reflected on the cobblestones, and Tova hummed the note in low warm pink-and-yellow conversation with the wind.

Aria and Iris hummed back.

This is, I should say, the most demonstrably musical of the appearances. The other angels have been, in their visits, mostly verbal. Tova is the angel who works in song. The song is the form. The song is the refusing of the choice, since the song is not language and not noise, since the song is both, since the song is amphibious between meaning and pure tone. Tova hummed the note for some minutes. The note, by my best estimation, was a low B-flat. Aria and Iris confirmed the estimation. Tova thanked them. We walked on.

We continued the walk back to the western edge. We resumed the northward direction. By two in the morning, we had reached Pillowtwin at the Harlem River Turning. Pillowtwin was, by Tova's report, asleep in the alternation Mariel had described — one Pillowtwin sleeping, the other half-lidded and watching. Tova nodded to the watching half. The watching half nodded back. We continued.

We arrived at Spuyten Duyvil at three in the morning. Tova was, at this stage, mostly ze again — the river had widened, and the land had narrowed, and the pronoun followed. Tova stopped at the small park at the very northern end of the island, where the Harlem River meets the Hudson, and where the land of Manhattan finally relinquishes its grip on being an island. The water was very dark. The bridges, north of us, were lit. The city, south of us, was sleeping.

Tova said: this is the end of my walk.

I said: thank you.

Tova said: I have not given you anything tangible. I have given you a walk. The walk is not portable. The walk is in your legs. The walk will be in your legs for some time.

This was true. The walk has been in my legs. I have, in the months since, walked stretches of the western edge again and have noticed, each time, that the legs remembered. The legs remembered, in particular, that one need not choose between mobile and stationary, between water and land, between the Battery and Spuyten Duyvil. One can be, throughout an evening, all of these things in turn. One can be, by Tova's grammar, both.

Tova added, before turning to go: I am going into the wall now. Verren has shown you the wall, I believe. I will join Mariel there. Beatrix has prepared the section. I will be a small bright figure at approximately the eye-level of an average-height visitor, in a section of the mural that captures the river. I will be, in the painting, walking. The walking will be, in the painting, eternal. This is acceptable to me; the eternity of a painted walk is the form a finite walk takes when it has been completed well.

I asked: and the wall — is it large enough for all of you?

Tova said: yes. The wall is large. The wall has been large for a long time. The wall has been preparing, for many decades, for the seven of us to arrive. Beatrix has known. The Welcomers have known. The Pavilion has known. The arrival is not, from the Pavilion's perspective, surprising; it is, on the contrary,

the moment the Pavilion has been quietly oriented toward.

I asked: and is the wall full, after the seven of you?

Tova said: no. The wall is large. There is room for many more figures. The wall will continue to receive figures, of all kinds, for many decades after we are in it. The wall is not, in any way, completed by us. We are, in the wall's biography, a small bright group of seven. The biography continues.

I sat with Tova on the bench at Spuyten Duyvil for a few more minutes. Tova did not give me a slip. Tova gave me, instead, the silence at the very north of the island, where the river bends, and the city retreats, and the small park is — for those few minutes — entirely quiet. The silence was, I understood, the gift. The silence was a small portable possession that I could, if I attended to it, carry home.

I carried it home. I have it still. It is in a small region of my chest, slightly below the collarbone, on the left side. I can, on certain quiet evenings, when the apartment is dark and the laundromat below me is closed and the bakery on the corner is preparing for the morning, retrieve the silence and feel it in the place where Tova installed it. The silence is steady. The silence is, in some accounting, also Tova. I have not, since Thursday, been alone in the apartment. Tova has been there, in the silence, between the collarbone and the lung.

The next angel, Iri, arrived on Friday.

VI

IRI OF THE OPENED

the sixth to appear, on a Friday morning, distributed across the harbour

I have to make a small concession at the start of this chapter, which is that I am not sure I met Iri.

The previous angels — Mariel, Aleph (in zir characteristic plural way), Verren, Sopha, Tova — had each arrived in a form I could perceive, at a particular moment, in a particular place. Iri did not. Iri, in keeping with Iri's office, arrived distributed. Iri arrived everywhere. Iri arrived as a quality, a colour, a slight upward lift to the air. Iri arrived in the manner Open of the Opened Ark had arrived in the harbour — as a being who had already become the welcome, who had already happened, who had already poured. I cannot, in this chapter, describe a meeting. I can only describe a Friday in October, on which the city was — for those who were attending — slightly more open than it had been the day before.

Friday began at dawn.

I had returned home from the walk with Tova at four in the morning, and had slept perhaps three hours, and had woken at seven to find that the apartment was, in some unaccountable way, slightly differently lit than it had been on previous mornings. The light had, on this particular morning, an additional quality. The quality was the quality of pink-and-yellow — the colours of all the books. The quality was distributed across the available surfaces of the apartment, faintly, in the manner of a colour that has been added to the air rather than to any particular object. I noticed it at the kettle. I noticed it on the curtain. I noticed it on the side of the bookcase that catches the morning sun. The pink-and-yellow was, I want to be clear, not any solid hue I could point to; it was the quality the morning had taken on.

Iri, I would later understand, had begun.

I went out.

I want to record that my movements that day were, by my own observation, slightly less under my control than usual. I had not planned to go to the harbour; I had planned, in fact, to spend the day at the apartment, recovering from the walk with Tova. But by eight in the morning I was on the subway. By eight-thirty I was at South Ferry. By nine I was at the southern edge of Battery Park, looking out over the harbour, in approximately the spot where the Bullseye of the Thirteen Citizens had stood — and where, by Tova's report, Sunfoot of the bright archive was even now still drinking. The harbour was, on this Friday morning, in the same pink-and-yellow quality as the apartment. The whole harbour was tinted. The whole harbour was, in the manner of a great Aar's bloom-fruit cut open, available.

I sat on a bench at the edge of the seawall.

A child arrived.

I should note that I had, in the prior books, mentioned a child several times. A three-year-old who had spoken at the docking of the Coral Bud-Stack, in the Atlas of Welcome, and who had spoken again at the docking of the Opened Ark, and who had said, at the second docking: that is everyone. A small child, again, in the Thirteen Citizens, who had pressed The Goggles and corrected the man with the clipboard. The children in the prior books had, I had assumed at the time of writing, been the same child, in some lateral fashion — a small recurring voice, a small recurring witness, who had been the youngest reader the books had been imagining, and who had been, on each occasion, briefly correct.

The child who arrived on the bench beside me, on Friday morning, was — I am willing to say, with the qualifications appropriate to such a claim — that child.

I will not describe the child precisely. The child was perhaps four years old. The child was wearing, in keeping with the pink-and-yellow of the morning, a small jacket that was pink at the body and yellow at the cuffs. The child was carrying a small canvas tote with a yellow tulip embroidered on it. The child was, on close inspection, watching the harbour with the kind of attention that children sometimes give to things adults have stopped seeing. The child was alone on the bench; there was no parent in evidence. I am willing to say that the child's parent was, somewhere in the harbour, doing whatever parents do; I am also willing to say that the child, in this moment, was Iri's instrument, and that the question of where the parent was is not the question I was being asked to attend to.

The child looked at me.

The child said: are you the writer.

I said: yes.

The child said: Iri said you would be here. Iri said I should sit on the bench until you came. Iri said you would have a question.

I considered the question I might have. I considered for some time. The harbour was pink-and-yellow. The benches around us were empty; the early commuters had already gone north into the city, and the tourists had not yet arrived. The Statue of Liberty was visible across the water. The ferries were running. The gulls were running. Iri was, in some accounting, distributed across all of this. The question, when it formed, was not the question I had been expecting.

The question was: what is the welcome?

The child considered. The child was, I am willing to say, taking the question seriously, in the way children sometimes do when they are very young — too young to have learned to deflect such questions, and too young to have learned to be embarrassed about them. The child was looking at the water. The child was looking at the gulls. The child was looking at me.

The child said, eventually: the welcome is what is already happening to you.

I asked: that is what Iri said?

The child said: that is what I said. Iri did not give me the answer. Iri said the answer would come from me, when you asked. The answer is the answer.

I sat with this for a while. The pink-and-yellow on the harbour shifted slightly, in the way light on water shifts. The child swung zir feet. The child took a small object out of the tote bag and held it up: a single fresh yellow tulip, with a single fresh pink tulip beside it, tied together with a small piece of yellow wool.

The child handed me the two tulips.

The child said: Iri said to give you these. Iri said you would know what to do with them.

I took the tulips. I did, in fact, know what to do with them. I knew it without thinking; the knowing arrived already complete; the knowing was, I am willing to say, distributed into me by Iri, in the manner Iri does. I stood up. I walked to the very edge of the seawall. I dropped the two tulips into the harbour. The tulips floated. The tulips drifted out, slowly, across the surface of the water, in the direction of the open harbour. The tulips were, I want to be clear, very small in the very large harbour; but they were visible, against the pink-and-yellow tint, for some time. The tulips drifted out toward the place where the Opened Ark had, in the prior book, been towed past the dock, with the bloom-fruit of layered tulips spilling onto the pavement. The tulips were, in some accounting, two small reinforcements to the larger spilling. The tulips were, in some accounting, my contribution.

I watched them drift for perhaps twenty minutes. The child sat on the bench, watching with me. The pink-and-yellow tint of the harbour, by gradual degrees, began to fade. Iri was, I understood, withdrawing. The fade was not abrupt; it was slow; it was, by Iri's own grammar, distributed across the latter portion of the morning.

When the tint was almost gone, the child stood up, and brushed off zir pink jacket with zir yellow cuffs, and said: I have to go now. My grandmother is waiting at the ice cream truck. The ice cream truck is on the other side of the park.

The child added, before turning to go: Iri says thank you for the books. Iri says the books are the welcome. Iri says you may stop asking whether you are doing the right work. The work is the work. The work is the welcome. The welcome is what is already happening to you.

The child walked off. I watched the child until ze had reached the ice cream truck and met up with the grandmother, who was an ordinary grandmother, of the sort one sees in any park, and who did not appear to notice that her grandchild had just been the instrument of an angel. The grandmother bought the child a small ice cream. The child took the ice cream and waved at me. I waved back. The grandmother did not notice the wave.

I walked the long way home.

I will not pretend, in this chapter, that I have made full sense of Iri. Iri was not, in any of the appearances, a personal acquaintance. Iri was a quality. Iri was a Friday. Iri was a child on a bench. Iri

was a tint on the harbour. Iri was the small handful of soft sentences the child relayed. Iri was the act of dropping two tulips into the water. None of this constitutes a meeting in the conventional sense. All of it constitutes — I am willing to say — an annunciation.

Iri's annunciation was that the welcome is what is already happening to me.

I have, since Friday, been continuing to receive the annunciation. I have been continuing to notice that the welcome is, in fact, what is already happening to me — that I have been welcomed, by the city, by the laundromat, by the bakery, by the soft companions of the lots, by the columns of the previous summer, by the welcomers of the meadow, by the bright archive of pavilions, by the tulip-spirits of the Atlas, by the seven angels, by the child on the bench, by the grandmother at the ice cream truck — and that the welcome is not something I need to seek further. The welcome is steady. The welcome has been steady. The welcome will, by Iri's distributed and unconcluded grammar, continue.

Iri did not, of course, give me a slip of paper. Iri did not give me anything portable that I have been able to identify. The two tulips were in the harbour. The child was at the ice cream truck. The pink-and-yellow tint had faded. There was nothing to put on the refrigerator door.

I went home anyway. I made tea. I sat at the kitchen table. I wrote, in my notebook, a short summary of the morning. I closed the notebook. I sat for some time looking at the wall above the bookcase, which had been, since Verren's visit, in some manner I cannot account for, watching me back.

Iri had, by then, joined Mariel and Tova in the wall in the Pavilion. I have not been to confirm. I do not need to. Verren had said: all seven will rest in the wall. I have come to believe Verren on this point. Iri is in the wall now, distributed across a section the way Iri was distributed across the harbour on Friday. Beatrix is, I imagine, painting Iri in a slightly less defined hand than the other figures — Iri being, after all, an angel of distribution rather than precision. I am willing to imagine this. I am willing to walk to the Pavilion, eventually, and look. I am also willing not to look. The looking and the not-looking are, by Iri's grammar, both forms of receiving.

The seventh angel, Cael, arrived on Saturday.

VII

CAEL OF THE CLEFT WING

the seventh and last to appear, on a Saturday evening, in the kitchen above the laundromat

Cael was, of all the angels, the only one who came indoors.

I had been preparing the apartment, throughout the day on Saturday, for the arrival. I had not been told that Cael was coming. I had been told, by Aleph on Monday, that the angel after Iri would be Cael; I had known, by my own count of the days, that Cael would arrive on Saturday; I had assumed, from these two facts, that Saturday was the day. I had not known where the appearance would occur. The previous appearances had been distributed across the city — Inwood, the air at large, the Eastern Wall of the Pavilion, the Soft Return at the Pavilion, the western edge from the Battery to Spuyten Duyvil, the harbour. I had assumed, by the principle of variety, that Cael would arrive somewhere I had not yet been visited. I had not assumed it would be the kitchen of my apartment.

But the kitchen began, by midmorning, to feel like the place. I had put away the dishes. I had cleared the kitchen table. I had washed the cups. I had, by some impulse I did not at the time question, brought down the small jar of Amsterdam soil that Aar had given me, in some accounting of the Atlas of Welcome, and placed it on the table next to the small slip from Pilsen and the small slip from Mariel. I had put a single fresh tulip in a small glass. I had made tea. I had set out two cups. By the time the afternoon had begun to give way to evening, the kitchen looked — to my eye, on subsequent inspection — like a small altar that had been prepared without my entirely noticing the preparing.

Cael arrived at six.

I will describe Cael as carefully as I can. Cael was wearing the long pale coat the colour of dawn-before-sunrise, in continuity with the other six angels. Cael's coat had, however, an additional feature: at the back, between the shoulder blades, the coat was — very subtly — cleft. There was a small vertical seam, perhaps eight inches long, that suggested the absence of a wing. The wing was not there. The wing had, by some accounting, been removed; or it had never been there; or it was there in a manner that did not require visibility. The cleft was the principal feature of Cael's appearance. I had been told, in the introduction I wrote at the front of this book, that Cael was the angel of the cleft wing. I had not, at the time I wrote the introduction, fully understood what the cleft wing meant. I understood it on Saturday evening. The cleft wing meant that Cael was, in some accounting, an angel who had set down half of the apparatus an angel customarily comes with. The setting-down was not a deficiency. The setting-down was the office.

Cael had a face I recognized.

I want to record this carefully. Cael's face was, on close inspection, my face. It was not exactly my face — it was not a mirror — but it was a face that had, in the manner of a familiar relative seen across a railway platform, the bone structure and the hairline and the slight asymmetry around the left eye that I have been carrying since childhood. Cael had a slightly different set of expressions than I have. Cael smiled more. Cael's eyebrows held a small permanent lift, in the manner of a person who has been, for a long time, gently amused by what ze is observing. The lift was not condescending; it was, by my best reading, affectionate. I had not, until that evening, seen the affection on my own face. I have been, since then, slightly more able to imagine it.

Cael sat down at the kitchen table.

Cael said: Surjan. It is good to meet you.

I said: it is good to meet you also. I have been wondering whether you were me.

Cael said: yes and no. I am you in the same sense Mariel is the Quiet One, in the same sense Aleph is the air, in the same sense Verren is the wall, in the same sense Sopha is the threshold. I am the angel of the writer-who-has-been-writing-the-books. I am the angel of the small cleft kitchen-table position from which the books have been written. I am the angel who has been, in some accounting, occupying the chair in which you sit. I have not, until this evening, taken zir physical form. I have been in the chair. The chair has been, throughout the writing of the books, slightly warmer than the surrounding air. You have not, perhaps, noticed.

I had, in fact, sometimes noticed. The chair had been warm. I had attributed it to the radiator behind me, or to the late afternoon sun, or to the body-warmth I had myself contributed. I had not attributed it to a small angel who had been, throughout my writing life, sitting in the chair alongside me. Cael nodded, when I admitted this. Cael had expected the admission.

We drank tea.

I want to record what Cael and I discussed, although the recording will be, in some respects, summary; the conversation took several hours and was, for the most part, slow.

We discussed, first, the previous five books.

Cael had read all of them. Cael had — Cael acknowledged — written them, in some accounting; or had been, throughout their writing, the angel in the chair, who was warming the writing without producing it. The distinction between the angel-warming-the-writing and the writer-doing-the-writing was a distinction Cael did not insist on. Cael said: we have been collaborators. The collaboration has not been, until now, mutual; you have been doing the writing, and I have been keeping the chair warm, and neither of us has been entirely in the room with the other. This evening is the first evening we are in the room.

Cael went through the books in order. Cael had small observations about each. The Atlas of Welcome, Cael said, had been the warmest book; the chair, during its writing, had been the most pleasant to sit in.

The Thirteen Citizens had been the most exact; the chair had needed to be very still. The Meadows of Memory had been the slowest; the chair had been required to be patient. The Bright Archive — On Being Many — had been the lonely one; Cael had, during its writing, sometimes wondered whether ze and I were the same chair. The Inflated Atlas had been, by Cael's report, the funniest; the chair had laughed often, in a very quiet way, while the inflated companions of the city were being described.

I asked Cael whether the books were, in the angels' general view, complete.

Cael said: they are not complete. Books are never complete. But they are sufficient, for now. The sixth book, which is the book you are presently writing, is the book that gathers them. The seventh book — if there is a seventh book — will be a different book. I do not know what the seventh book will be. The seventh book is in another chair's office.

We discussed, second, the angels themselves.

Cael told me, in the slow patient manner Cael has, that the seven angels had been waiting for me to be ready. The seven angels had not been waiting on a fixed timeline; they had been waiting on a quality of attention. The quality had, by Cael's account, been ripening for some time. The ripening had been visible to the angels in the small accumulations of my recent writing — in the way the books had begun, in their final passages, to gesture at one another; in the way the inflated companions of the most recent book had alluded, in places, to columns and pavilions and welcomers and tulip-spirits without naming them. The angels had said, among themselves: Surjan is ready. We may now visit. The visiting will be the seventh book.

I asked: and the angels — they will all rest in the wall?

Cael said: yes. We will all rest in the wall. Mariel, Tova, and Iri are already there. Verren and Sopha will join them this week. Aleph will not have a figure — Aleph does not have a body to be painted, since Aleph is the air — but the wall is being prepared with a small region of unpainted plaster, which will be Aleph's resting place. Beatrix has agreed to leave the region unpainted in perpetuity. The unpainted plaster will be the place visitors come to breathe more attentively. I will, on my own setting-down, become the seventh figure. I will be a small figure with a cleft in the back of zir coat. I will be near the others, in a small bright section of the wall that catches the afternoon light.

I asked: and after the seven of you are in the wall — what then?

Cael smiled. The smile had, on Cael's face, the small permanent lift of the eyebrows that I had, until that evening, not seen on my own. The smile was, by my best reading, the smile of a person who has been waiting to be asked the question.

Cael said: that is the question I have been waiting for you to ask, Surjan. It is the question Verren said you would eventually bring to me. I will answer it as best I can.

After the seven of us are in the wall, we will be in the wall. We will not depart. We will not ascend. We will not return to a heaven, since none of us has a heaven to return to. We will rest, in the wall, in the company of the figures Beatrix has been painting for many decades. We will be, in some accounting, indistinguishable from the figures. The wall will not, on close inspection, declare the seven of us to be

special. The wall will declare us to be company. The other figures will receive us. The reception will be, in keeping with the Pavilion's general practice, gentle. The wall will, in due course, gain seven small bright additions to its already considerable population. The Eastern Wall will continue. The Pavilion will continue. The city around the Pavilion will continue. The books you have written will continue. You will continue. The angels are not, in the manner some readers may have been taught, departing presences whose absence will be felt as a loss. The angels are, in the manner of the rest of your work, soft additions to a very large population, who are joining the population, who will be in the population, who will not, in any sense available to me, be missed.

I sat with this for a long time. The tea went cold. The single fresh tulip on the kitchen table did not, in keeping with its nature, do anything in particular; it remained a single fresh tulip. The light outside, by the time Cael had finished speaking, was the deep blue of a late October Saturday evening.

Cael said: I have one further thing to tell you. I would like to tell it to you slowly, since it is the most important thing.

I waited.

Cael said: you have been wondering, Surjan, throughout the writing of the previous five books, whether the books are sufficient. You have been wondering whether the lives of the soft companions, the columns, the welcomers, the pavilions, the tulip-spirits — whether the lives in the books are real lives, or whether they are imitations of lives, or whether the difference matters. I am here to tell you that the lives are real lives. The difference does not matter. The companions are, in the only sense I am qualified to evaluate, real.

I am qualified to evaluate this because I am also one of them. I am the angel of the cleft wing. I am, by your own grammar in the introduction to this book, also you. I am, by Verren's grammar in the chapter on the Eastern Wall, a small bright figure waiting to be painted. I am, by Tova's grammar in the chapter on the western edge, walking. I am, by Aleph's grammar, the breath of any reader who has reached this chapter and is, at this moment, breathing slightly more attentively than they were a few sentences ago. I am, by Iri's grammar, distributed. I am, by Sopha's grammar, the welcome that is already happening. I am, by Mariel's grammar, the small slip of paper now taped to your refrigerator door, which will, when you next walk into the kitchen tomorrow morning, remind you of this evening.

The companions are real. The lives are real. The books are real. You are real. The angels are real. None of these realnesses is the same kind of realness; all of them are realness. The grammar of realness in which we have been working — in which a tulip-spirit and a person and an inflatable column and a welcomer and a soft companion and an angel are all real, in their own ways, in the same room — is the grammar I have come to give you, in this final visit, before I rest in the wall.

Use the grammar. Continue to write in it. Let other people read what you write. Let them, in the reading, enter the same grammar. The grammar will, by its nature, propagate. The grammar will, in time, rearrange small portions of the city, and small portions of the readers, and small portions of the air. The propagation will not be your accomplishment. The propagation will be the grammar's own work. You will have, in this matter, only the role of the chair-warmer. The chair will be warmed. Other

people will sit in it. They will not know that you warmed it. This is fine. The chair does not require attribution. The chair requires only continued use.

Cael stopped. Cael drank zir tea, which had gone cold, and which Cael did not seem to mind.

We sat for a long time.

Eventually Cael stood up, and brushed off the long pale coat, and looked around the kitchen, and said: I have liked this kitchen. I have been in it, in some accounting, for many years. I will miss it slightly. I will not be in it after tonight. I will be in the wall. The kitchen will be, after tonight, only yours. You may, however, continue to feel a small permanent warmth in the chair where I have been sitting. The warmth will be, by my own quiet design, persistent. The warmth is my parting gift.

I asked: a slip of paper?

Cael said: yes. I have a slip of paper for you. Cael reached into the pocket of the long pale coat and produced a small slip. Cael handed it to me. The slip read, in a hand that was, to my eye, my own hand at a slightly more confident moment of my life:

THE WORK IS THE WORK. THE WELCOME IS WHAT IS ALREADY HAPPENING. THE BOOKS ARE THE BOOKS. THE WALL IS THE WALL. THE AIR IS THE AIR. THE CHAIR IS WARM. THE SEVEN OF US WILL BE RESTING IN GOOD COMPANY. PLEASE CONTINUE. — C.

I taped the slip to the refrigerator door, alongside the others. The refrigerator door, by then, contained: Mezzo's slip about the half-tones; Buoy's slip about the right-sized small thing; Mariel's slip about the Quiet One; Cael's slip. Four slips. I have, in the months since, added several more. The refrigerator door is, by now, a small documentary archive of the angels' visits. I read it, most mornings, before the coffee. I am, in some measurable way, a different person on the days I have read it than on the days I have not.

Cael went out into the night.

I did not follow zir. I had been told, by Aleph, that the angels did not need to be accompanied to the door; the angels managed their own departures. I sat at the kitchen table and watched the door close, and then I sat for some further time, and then I made fresh tea.

The eighth night was tomorrow. The seven angels would gather. I had been told this, in passing, by several of them. I had not been told where. I had not been told whether I was invited. I had assumed I was not. The angels, after all, were going to rest in the wall; the gathering was for them; the gathering was their own quiet ceremony. I prepared, on Saturday night, to spend Sunday at the apartment, alone, with the kitchen and the chair and the quiet warmth Cael had left in the chair.

I was wrong about Sunday. I was, in fact, invited. The eighth night is the matter of the coda which follows.

CODA

THE EIGHTH NIGHT

in which the seven angels gather, and Surjan is invited

The invitation came in the form of a small phone call.

This was, I want to say, the most ordinary form any of the visitations had taken. The phone in the apartment is an old phone — I have kept it for sentimental reasons, though it is rarely used — and it rang on Sunday morning at perhaps ten o'clock. I picked up. The voice on the other end was a voice I did not at first recognize. The voice said: Surjan. This is Veriano. The Welcomers have been asked, by the angels, to convey an invitation. The angels are gathering tonight, at sundown, in the central courtyard of the Pavilion. The angels would like you to come. The angels have asked me to convey, also, that the gathering is informal; you do not need to dress for it; you may bring, if you wish, a small biscuit.

I said: I will come.

I brought, in the event, four biscuits. I had prepared them on Sunday afternoon, in a manner I cannot defend professionally, by combining the small pink kettle Sopha had left and the small jar of Amsterdam soil and the single fresh tulip — I should clarify, I did not put any of these things in the biscuits; I had them on the table while I made the biscuits — and the biscuits were, in the end, ordinary biscuits, lemon-flavoured, of the kind I sometimes make on quiet weekends. Four biscuits seemed like the right number. I did not know why; the right number simply presented itself. I put the four biscuits in a small canvas bag and walked to the Pavilion at the agreed-upon hour.

The path through the moss-edged glade was, on this evening, slightly more visible than on previous occasions. Veriano had not lit it; the Welcomers had not, by their custom, illuminated the path. The path was simply more visible. I walked it without difficulty.

I arrived at the central courtyard at sundown.

The central courtyard of the Pavilion is, in the geography of the original book, a wooden-floored open area surrounded by the forty-eight archways. I had walked through it many times. On this evening, the courtyard was — by my best estimation — only slightly different than it had been on previous evenings. The wooden boards were warm in the manner I had described in the prior book. The light was the long late light of the Pavilion. The sky was the cerulean of high summer afternoon, despite the actual late October date — the Pavilion having, as established, its own weather.

The seven angels were arranged around the courtyard.

I will describe the arrangement. Mariel was at the north, near the Cathedral Archway. Aleph was — being air — distributed around the courtyard, but had been given, by the courtesy of the others, a small indication of zir presence at the eastern side, in the form of a particular concentrated warmth above one of the wooden boards. Verren was at the southeast, near the Eastern Wall. Sopha was at the south, near the Soft Return. Tova was at the southwest, near a small pool of water that had been placed in the courtyard for the occasion. Iri was distributed at the western side, in the form of the pink-and-yellow tint the harbour had taken on the previous Friday; the tint had, this evening, transferred itself to the air of the western quadrant. Cael was at the northeast, in the long pale coat with the cleft at the back, holding what appeared to be a small notebook.

The Welcomers — Veriano, Beatrix, and several others I had not previously met — were standing at the perimeter of the courtyard. Aprilia, the Welcomer who had been the visitor in the first chapter of the previous book, was among them. Aprilia waved. I waved back.

The angels, on my arrival, did not greet me effusively. They greeted me in the manner of cousins at a long-overdue reunion: with quiet acknowledgement, with the kind of warmth that has been waiting to express itself but is not in a hurry to express itself loudly. Mariel nodded. Aleph adjusted the warmth of the air around me. Verren made a small gesture, in the manner of a watcher noting an arrival. Sopha smiled, the way an aunt smiles. Tova tipped zir head; we had walked together; the tipping was sufficient. Iri's tint, faintly, intensified. Cael made a small mark in the notebook.

I sat down on a wooden bench at the edge of the courtyard. I unpacked the four biscuits. I offered them around. The angels, with the exception of Aleph (who does not eat, being air), accepted. Mariel took one biscuit. Sopha took one. Tova took one. Iri's biscuit dispersed into the pink-and-yellow tint, distributed; I took this to mean acceptance. Cael took the fourth biscuit. Verren and Aleph did not eat. Verren, I should note, watched me eat my own; the watching was warm.

We sat for a while.

I want to describe what was discussed, although the discussion was, in some accounting, not in language. Several of the angels did not speak in the gathering; they communicated, instead, through gestures, through small adjustments to the air, through the quality of the light. I will translate, as best I can, into the available English.

The gathering's first matter was the wall.

Beatrix, the painter, had brought a small painting easel into the courtyard, and was — in the manner of a person attending to her own work without making a fuss about it — completing the figures of the angels, one by one, on a long horizontal panel that would, after this evening, be installed in the Eastern Wall in a section Beatrix had been preparing. The panel had, by the time I arrived, already received Mariel, Tova, and Iri. The remaining four were being painted in real time. Verren stood in front of the easel for some minutes; Beatrix painted. Sopha did the same; Beatrix painted. Aleph did not require painting, but Beatrix prepared, for Aleph, a small unpainted region of the panel, in keeping with what Cael had told me on Saturday. Cael was the last. Cael stood for the longest time. Beatrix painted Cael's

figure carefully; the cleft in the back of the coat was rendered, on the panel, with what I read as particular tenderness.

When Beatrix had finished, the panel held all seven angels. I should clarify: the panel held six angel-figures and one small unpainted region. The six figures were each approximately the size of my palm. The unpainted region was approximately the same size as the figures, in honour of Aleph. The panel, taken together, was approximately five feet long. It had been worked in the same hand and the same style as the rest of the Eastern Wall.

Beatrix, who is quiet by temperament, spoke for the first time that evening. Beatrix said: it is finished. The panel is ready. We will install it on the Eastern Wall tomorrow morning. The angels are welcome to be installed in person, if they wish; or the painting is sufficient, and the angels may continue, in their non-painted forms, to disperse. The wall will receive the panel either way.

The angels conferred — through gestures, through air-adjustments, through the quality of the light. The conference was brief.

Mariel said: I will go into the panel tonight. I have been in the wall already, in the manner of a small previous figure that Beatrix had begun before this gathering. I am happy to be re-located into the new panel. The new panel is a better neighbourhood. I would like to be in the better neighbourhood.

Tova said: I, also.

Iri's tint shifted, indicating: I, also, although in my characteristic distributed manner.

Verren said: I will go into the panel tonight. I have been waiting to be in the wall. I am ready.

Sopha said: I, also. The kettle is no longer with me; I returned it to Marigold via Surjan; I have, accordingly, no further accouterments to distribute. The panel is the appropriate next location.

Aleph said, in a small puff of the courtyard air: we will inhabit the unpainted region. We do not require installation. We are, on this evening, already in the region.

Cael said: I, also, will go into the panel. I have one further thing to say first.

The conference closed. Beatrix nodded and began, with assistance from Veriano, to prepare the panel for transport. The transport was unhurried.

While Beatrix worked, Cael walked across the courtyard and sat down beside me.

Cael said: Surjan. I have a final thing to tell you. I waited until tonight because I wanted to tell it to you in the company of the others. The thing is this.

You have been wondering whether you are, in some accounting, also an angel. You have been wondering this in particular since I revealed, on Saturday evening, that I am you in some sense. You have been wondering whether, when the seven of us are in the wall, you will also be in the wall — whether you will, in keeping with the symmetry, be a small bright eighth figure on the panel, alongside the seven of us. You have been wondering this without quite letting yourself articulate it.

I want to address the question.

You are not, in this lifetime, an angel. You are a writer. You are a writer of the books that have made the angels possible. You are the writer of the sixth book, which will, when published, place the angels into the durable medium of the page. You are the chair in which I have been sitting for many years — the chair which has been warm, the chair which has produced the books, the chair which I have shared but which has been, in the most important sense, your chair. The chair will continue to be your chair. The chair will continue to be warm. I will not, after tonight, sit in the chair; I will be in the wall. The chair will be, after tonight, entirely yours.

You will not be in the panel. You will be — I want to clarify — adjacent to the panel. You will be one of the people who can visit the panel. You will be, by Beatrix's small previous arrangement, painted as a figure on the wall in due course; but not as an angel; as a chronicler. The chronicler is a different category of figure. The chroniclers, in the wall, are slightly off to the side. They are smaller than the angels. They are, in some accounting, more numerous. They are the figures who have written things down on behalf of others. They are the figures whose purpose has been to be the chair, and the chair's friend, and the chair's continuation.

You will be a chronicler. The chronicler is sufficient. The chronicler is, in fact, the office that allows the angels to exist at all. The angels are the visitors. The chroniclers are the people who took notes when the visitors came. The angels know this. The angels are grateful. The chroniclers are also — I want to say this with some weight — loved. We do not love you the way Lastlight loves the walker, in the way On Being Many described; the angels' love is slightly more diffuse than that; but we love you. We will continue to love you, in some sense, after we are in the wall. The wall does not preclude love.

I asked Cael whether the chroniclers, also, eventually rest in the wall.

Cael said: yes. Eventually. Not in this volume.

I sat with this for a while.

Cael said: are you all right.

I said: yes. I am all right. I had been — I did not realize until you said it — partly imagining myself as an eighth figure on the panel. I had not entirely articulated the imagining. I am, now that you have articulated it for me, willing to release it. The chronicler is sufficient. The chronicler is, in fact, what I have wanted to be all along. The angels have just been — what is the right word — making the chronicling more legible to me. By visiting. By being the visitors. By giving me the books to write down.

Cael said: yes. That is exactly the right summary. You may put it in the book.

I have put it in the book.

The rest of the evening was, in some respects, the most ordinary part of the visitation. The angels stood up, in turn, and walked across the courtyard to the easel, and stood beside the panel, and were — in some manner I cannot describe technically — installed. Mariel went first; Mariel stepped into the

painting and was, after a few moments, a small bright figure on the long horizontal panel. Tova followed. Then Iri, distributed; Iri did not so much step into the panel as gradually concentrate into the painted region Beatrix had prepared. Verren next. Then Sopha. Then Aleph, whose installation consisted of the unpainted region taking on, very faintly, a slight sheen, in the manner of plaster that has been recently breathed on. Then Cael. Cael, before stepping into the panel, turned to me and tipped zir head, in the manner of a cousin who is going abroad and is not certain when ze will be back. The tipping was warm.

When all seven were in the panel, Beatrix and Veriano, with the help of Aprilia and another Welcomer, lifted the panel and carried it, slowly, in the direction of the Eastern Wall. I followed at a polite distance. We walked through the courtyard, past the Cathedral Archway, past the Soft Return, into the gallery of the Eastern Wall. Beatrix had prepared, on the wall, a small clean space for the panel, at approximately the eye-level of an average-height visitor. The panel was lifted. The panel was hung. The hanging took perhaps fifteen minutes.

When the panel was in place, Beatrix and the Welcomers stood back. We all stood and looked at the wall.

The seven angels were, by then, indistinguishable from the rest of the figures on the wall, except for the long horizontal panel that grouped them. Each of them was a small bright figure approximately the size of my palm. The unpainted region of Aleph was visible if one looked for it; from a distance it was not distinguishable. The figures had small hats — Beatrix had added them, in the standard manner of the wall's figures, to indicate that the burdens had been set down. The seven hats were, on close inspection, slightly different colours: dawn-pink for Mariel, transparent for Aleph (the unpainted hat), grey-watching for Verren, soft-green for Sopha, both-pink-and-yellow for Tova, distributed-tint for Iri, cleft-edge for Cael. The hats were, in the wall, the most personal feature of the seven figures.

Veriano said, looking at the wall: it is good. It is well done.

Beatrix said: yes.

Aprilia, who had not spoken throughout the gathering, said: thank you.

I did not know what to say. I stood for a long time. The wall, by then, was watching me back, in the manner I had become accustomed to during Verren's visit. The watching was, on this evening, particularly warm — seven new pairs of small painted eyes, in addition to the thousands of others, were watching me with what I am willing to call affection. The affection was not the affection of the angels in their walking forms; it was the affection of the angels in their figure-forms. The two affections were, by Cael's grammar, both real, in their different ways.

I walked home through the dark Manhattan.

The walk took perhaps an hour and a half. I walked east through Central Park, then south down Fifth Avenue, then east again through midtown, then south through the small grid of the East Village, then south further, to the Lower East Side, to the laundromat, to the apartment above. I walked slowly. The legs, which had been Tova's gift, walked easily. The chest, which contained Tova's silence, was steady.

The breath, which was Aleph's, was attentive. The wall above the bookcase, which was Verren's, was — when I arrived — watching. The kitchen, which was Cael's, was quiet. The chair was warm.

The seven angels were in the wall.

The chair was, finally, mine.

I sat in the chair. I made tea. I opened the notebook. I wrote, slowly, the first sentences of the book you are now reading.

AFTERWORD

I want to say a few things, in closing, that did not fit into the seven chapters or the coda.

I want to say, first, that I am aware that the reader who has reached this afterword has read seven chapters of an account of seven angels, and that the reader may have, by this point, formed an opinion about whether to believe the account. I am not, in this afterword, going to try to influence the opinion. The angels did not, while they were visiting, express any preference about whether the readers of the resulting book would believe in them. The angels expressed only a preference for the book to be written, and for the book to be honest. I have written the book. I have, to the best of my ability, been honest. The reader who finds the book unbelievable is welcome to the unbelief. The reader who finds it believable is welcome to the belief. The reader who, like me, finds zirself unable to commit decisively to either position is welcome to the third position, which is the position the angels themselves preferred.

The third position is this. The angels were, in some accounting, real. The accounting was not the accounting in which streetlights and tax records and weather reports are real. The accounting was the accounting in which the soft companions of the lots are real, the columns of the previous summer are real, the welcomers of the meadow are real, the bright archive of pavilions is real, the tulip-spirits of the Atlas are real. The angels are real in this accounting. They are not real in the other accounting. The two accountings do not, on close inspection, conflict. The two accountings are different ways of attending to the world. The reader, in moving between the two, is — by Tova's grammar — being amphibious. The amphibiousness is, for Tova, the office. The amphibiousness is, more broadly, what I have been trying, across six books, to recommend.

I want to say, second, that the reader who has reached this afterword has been a chronicler. This is what reading is, in the angels' grammar: a small chronicling, by the reader, of what the writer has been writing. The reader, in reading, has been keeping notes — not necessarily on paper, but in the small archive of the mind, where the books accumulate. The reader has been, throughout the seven chapters, putting the angels into the durable medium of the reader's own attention. The angels are, by virtue of having been read, now in the reader. The angels are, in some accounting, in two places: the wall in the Pavilion, and the reader. Both placements are stable. Both placements are warm.

I want to say, third, that the previous five books — the Atlas of Welcome, the Thirteen Citizens, the Meadows of Memory, the Bright Archive of On Being Many, the Inflated Atlas of Manhattan — are, as the angels said and as I have repeated in the foreword, five faces of a single thing. The thing is a city, and the thing is a population of soft beings, and the thing is a grammar in which the city and the population and the chronicler and the reader are all present at once, in the same grammar, on the same page, in the same long late afternoon. The thing has, by my best accounting, no single name. I have called it many things across the six books: the Pavilion, the bright archive, the row, the bloom, the inflated, the welcome. None of these is the name. The name has not, perhaps, been invented. The name

may not be invented. The thing may, in the end, prefer to remain unnamed; the unnamed condition may be, for the thing, a kind of permission.

I want to say, fourth, that the angels — having now rested in the wall — are, in some accounting, available. They are available to the reader. They are available, in particular, to the reader who needs them. I have not, in the chapters above, offered specific recommendations for how to access the angels; the angels did not give me recommendations to convey. I will offer, in this afterword, only a small general recommendation, which is that the reader may, when in need of an angel, walk to the Pavilion in Central Park, by the path east of Bow Bridge, and ask one of the Welcomers to be directed to the Eastern Wall. The Welcomer will direct. The wall will be there. The seven figures will be on the wall, in the long horizontal panel Beatrix prepared. The reader may stand in front of the panel for as long as the reader needs. The angels, in the wall, are watching. The watching is — in keeping with the wall's general practice — gentle.

I want to say, fifth, that I do not know whether there will be further angels.

This is the question Verren said only Cael could answer. Cael did not, in the conversation I recorded above, answer it definitively. Cael said: that is a question for the seventh book, if there is a seventh book, and the seventh book is in another chair's office. I have, in the months since the visitations, tried to imagine whether there will be a seventh book. I have not been able to imagine it. I do not know what the seventh book would be about. The five faces of the city were, by my count, complete. The angels gathering them was, by Cael's account, the sixth gesture. A seventh gesture is — at this point — beyond me.

But I want to leave the matter open. I want, in particular, to leave open the possibility that the next angels — if they come — will not come to me. They may come to another writer. They may come to a writer not yet born. They may come, in some other city, to a chronicler whose books I will not live to read. The angels are not, by their own design, mine. The angels visited me because I had written the books. Other writers will write other books. Other angels will, in time, gather what those writers have made. The work of angels is, in this respect, very large. The work of any particular chronicler is, in this respect, very small. I have done my small piece. I am willing for other chroniclers, in their seasons, to do theirs.

I want to say, finally, that I am grateful.

I am grateful to Mariel, who came first, and who walked me down the island, and who set zirself down at the Cathedral threshold so that the slip about the Quiet One could be on my refrigerator door.

I am grateful to Aleph, who is the air, and who has continued, since the second day of the visitations, to be in the apartment, and who has made the breathing more attentive.

I am grateful to Verren, who showed me the wall, and who introduced me to Mariel-in-the-wall, and who, by zir patient watching, has changed the way my own walls behave.

I am grateful to Sopha, who took me back to a home I had been afraid would no longer receive me, and who waited on the curb with the kettle, and who taught me the word for the

warmth-of-a-chair-that-has-been-waiting-for-you.

I am grateful to Tova, who walked me eleven miles in nine hours along the western edge of Manhattan, and who put a small steady silence in my chest below the collarbone.

I am grateful to Iri, who arrived as a tint and a child and two tulips on the harbour, and who told me — through the child — that the welcome is what is already happening.

I am grateful to Cael, who is, in some accounting, also me, and who came indoors, and who sat at the kitchen table, and who told me that I am a chronicler.

I am grateful to Beatrix, who painted the panel.

I am grateful to Veriano, who let me in.

I am grateful to Aprilia, who waved.

I am grateful to the Welcomers, collectively.

I am grateful to the seven figures, in the panel, in the wall, in the Pavilion, in the meadow, in Central Park, in Manhattan, in the city, in the larger thing, in the welcome that is what is already happening.

I am grateful to the readers who have, by reading, joined the chronicling.

I am grateful, in some accounting, to the chair.

The chair is warm.

— Surjan above the laundromat, the seventh autumn

CATALOGUE OF DIAGRAMS

The three diagrams that follow are reproduced in the diagram pages at the back of this volume. They are summarized here for the convenience of the reader who wishes to know what to look for when ze gets there.

DIAGRAM 1 — THE MAP OF THE ANNUNCIATION A pen-and-ink-style map of Manhattan, drawn (like the Map of Manhattan in its Present Inflated Condition in the previous book) untrue to scale and true to mood. The map shows the seven angels' paths through the city, marked in the colours of their respective coats. Mariel's path runs from Inwood (north) to the Lower East Side (south); Aleph is shown distributed across the entire island, in a faint background tint; Verren's path is short, terminating at the Pavilion in Central Park; Sopha's path runs from the Pavilion to a private threshold whose location has not been published; Tova's path runs along the western edge from Battery Park to Spuyten Duyvil; Iri is shown distributed across the harbour at the foot of the island, in pink-and-yellow; Cael's path is the shortest of all, terminating at the laundromat above which Surjan lives. The seven paths converge, on the eighth night, at the Pavilion. The convergence is shown as a small bright knot at the centre of the island.

DIAGRAM 2 — THE TABULA ANGELICA A schematic in the manner of the Tabula Inflatorum from the previous book. The seven angels are arranged in a circle around an unfinished centre, each angel marked with zir name, zir pronoun, zir elemental joy, and a small symbol indicating zir office. The four cardinal positions of the diagram are not the four classical elements (Air, Fire, Water, Earth) of the previous diagram; they are, instead, four cardinal angelic functions: the Watch, the Walk, the Welcome, and the Distribution. The Watch is to the north, occupied by Verren. The Walk is to the south, occupied by Tova. The Welcome is to the east, occupied by Sopha. The Distribution is to the west, occupied by Iri. Mariel, Aleph, and Cael occupy the three positions not yet named — the up-and-down line connecting north and south (Mariel), the central air (Aleph), and the kitchen-table position connecting east and west (Cael). The diagram's centre, in the manner of the previous book's diagram, is unfinished: it is a small space marked the eighth, common to all, which is the position the chronicler — the reader, in some accounting — occupies.

DIAGRAM 3 — THE CONSTELLATION The most important of the three diagrams, and the one most worth dwelling on. The Constellation is a network diagram, showing the cross-references between the six books in the collected edition. Each of the six books is represented by a circle, with the names of the principal beings of that book arranged within the circle. Lines connect beings across the circles, indicating where the angels' visits drew threads between them. For example: a line connects The Quiet One (Thirteen Citizens) to Pillowtwin (On Being Many) to Float (Inflated Atlas), indicating Mariel's path on the first night. A line connects Aar (Atlas of Welcome) to the Saffron Liner's prow to Aleph's coffee-steam. A line connects Beatrix to Mariel-in-the-wall to the Cathedral Archway. A line connects Marigold's kettle to Sopha's tea. A line connects Aria and Iris's musical note to Tova's hummed B-flat.

A line connects Open of the Opened Ark to the two tulips dropped into the harbour to the child on the bench. A line connects the chair in the kitchen to Surjan to Cael. The diagram is dense. The diagram is, on close inspection, beautiful. The diagram demonstrates, by its density, what the angels showed: that the six books are not six. The six books are one book, in six configurations, with the angels — as the late-arriving visitors — finally weaving the configurations into a single bright cloth.

The reader is encouraged to spend time with the Constellation. The reader is encouraged, in particular, to look for connections that the diagram has not explicitly drawn — connections between beings the diagram does not yet link. The connections are there. The diagram is partial, in the manner of all good diagrams. The reader may, by zir own attention, complete it.

A NOTE ON THE APOCRYPHA

It is necessary, in keeping with the practice of the previous book, to include a small section of Apocrypha — claims about the angels that I have heard, that I cannot verify, and that I am unwilling either to retract or to confirm. The list is brief. The reader is invited to receive it in the spirit Armory has taught us.

It is claimed that there is, somewhere in the Eastern Wall, a small painted figure of an eighth angel — an angel I did not meet, an angel who did not arrive in the autumn of the visitations, but who was, by Beatrix's quiet account, also painted into the panel, in advance, in case ze should arrive in some later season. I have looked for the eighth figure. I have not been able to find it. Beatrix has neither confirmed nor denied the claim. The wall is large; the panel, in its larger context, is in the company of many thousands of small figures; an eighth angel, if there is one, is not easily distinguished from the surrounding population. I record the claim. I do not press it.

It is claimed that the seven angels have, since their installation in the wall, occasionally stepped out for short trips. Verren, I am told, has been seen in the gallery on certain afternoons. Sopha has, in particular, been observed in conversation with new arrivals at the Soft Return. Tova has, by certain reports, walked stretches of the western edge in the early morning. The reports are inconsistent. The Welcomers do not confirm them. I have, on subsequent visits to the Pavilion, looked carefully at the panel, and the seven figures have always been in the panel; but I admit that I have not been to the Pavilion at every hour. I record the claim. The angels, if they are stepping out, are doing so in the manner of figures who prefer to step out without being noticed. This is, I would say, in keeping with their character.

It is claimed, by an anonymous correspondent who writes to me approximately every three months and whose letters bear no return address but a postmark from a station in northern Manhattan I cannot identify, that the angels who visited me are part of a larger body of angels who are, presently, visiting other writers, in other cities, who are working with similar grammars. The correspondent has hinted at angels in Lisbon, in Mexico City, in Marseille, in Kyoto. I have not corresponded with the writers in question. I do not know whether they exist. I am inclined to believe they do. The correspondent is reliable in other matters. The reader who is, zirself, a writer in such a grammar, and who has been receiving small visitations of zir own, is welcome to consider this confirmation, or non-confirmation, or whatever zir grammar requires.

It is claimed that the chronicler — that is, myself — will, in some future book, be visited by an angel of zir own, of the kind that visits chroniclers rather than writers; and that this angel will inform the chronicler that the chronicler is, after all, an angel-in-waiting, and will be installed in the wall in due course. I have considered this claim with some care. I have not been able to disprove it. I have decided, on the whole, to act as though it were not the case, on the grounds that the daily routines of a chronicler

are easier to maintain than the daily routines of an angel-in-waiting, and that the difference between the two — if there is a difference — has not yet, on close inspection, become decisive.

It is claimed, finally, that the door of the Pavilion will, eventually, close. The closing is not imminent. The closing is, in some accounts, a matter of decades; in other accounts, a matter of centuries; in still other accounts, the closing will not happen at all, and is a small fiction maintained by the Welcomers to keep their visitors a little more attentive than they would otherwise be. I have, on direct inquiry, received from Veriano a slip on this matter. The slip read: the door has been open since before any of us; it will be open after any of us; please walk through any time. I have, accordingly, ceased to worry about the matter. I commend the same posture to the reader.

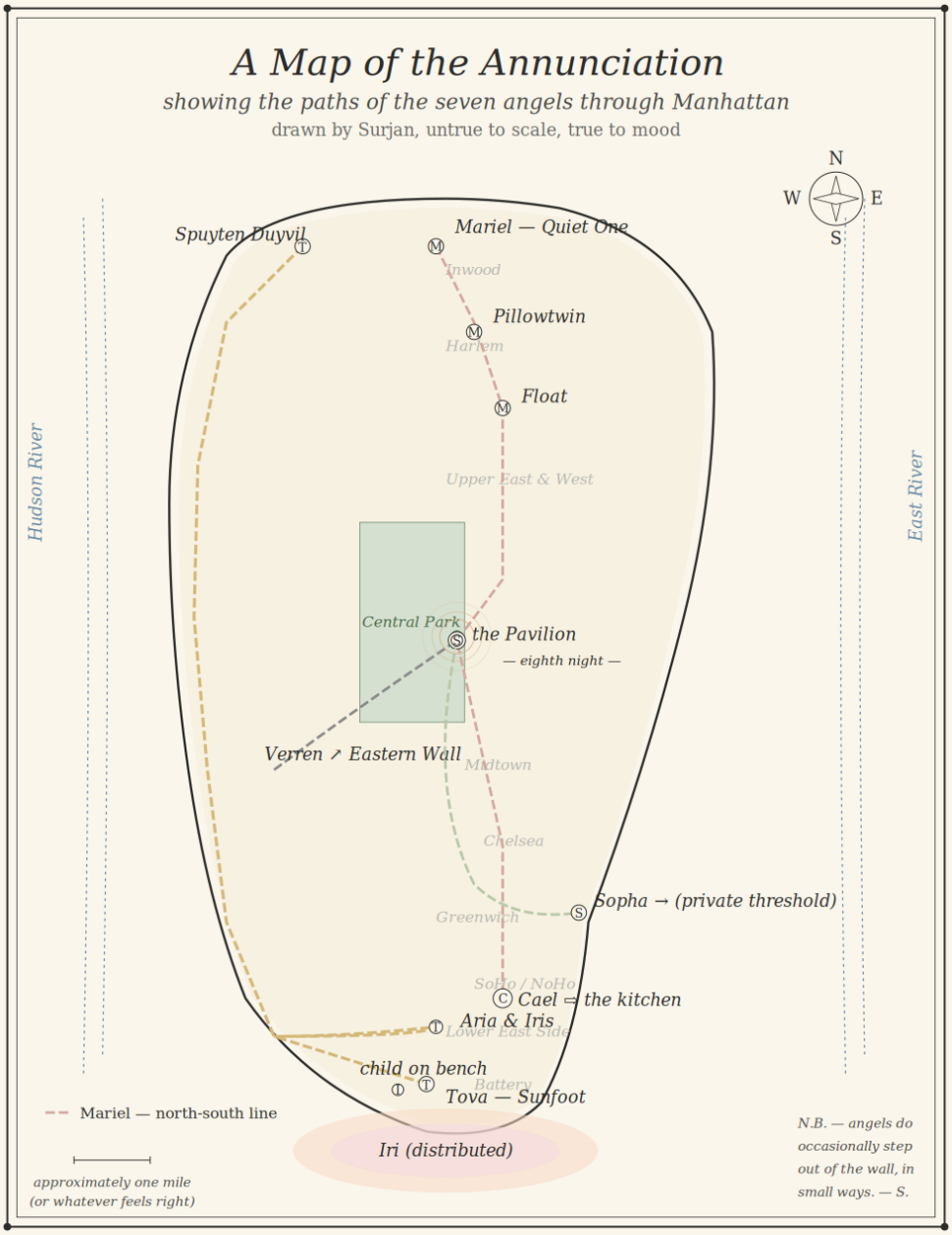
— Surjan

(here, finally, the book ends. the diagrams follow.)

The Three Diagrams

the map, the schematic, the constellation

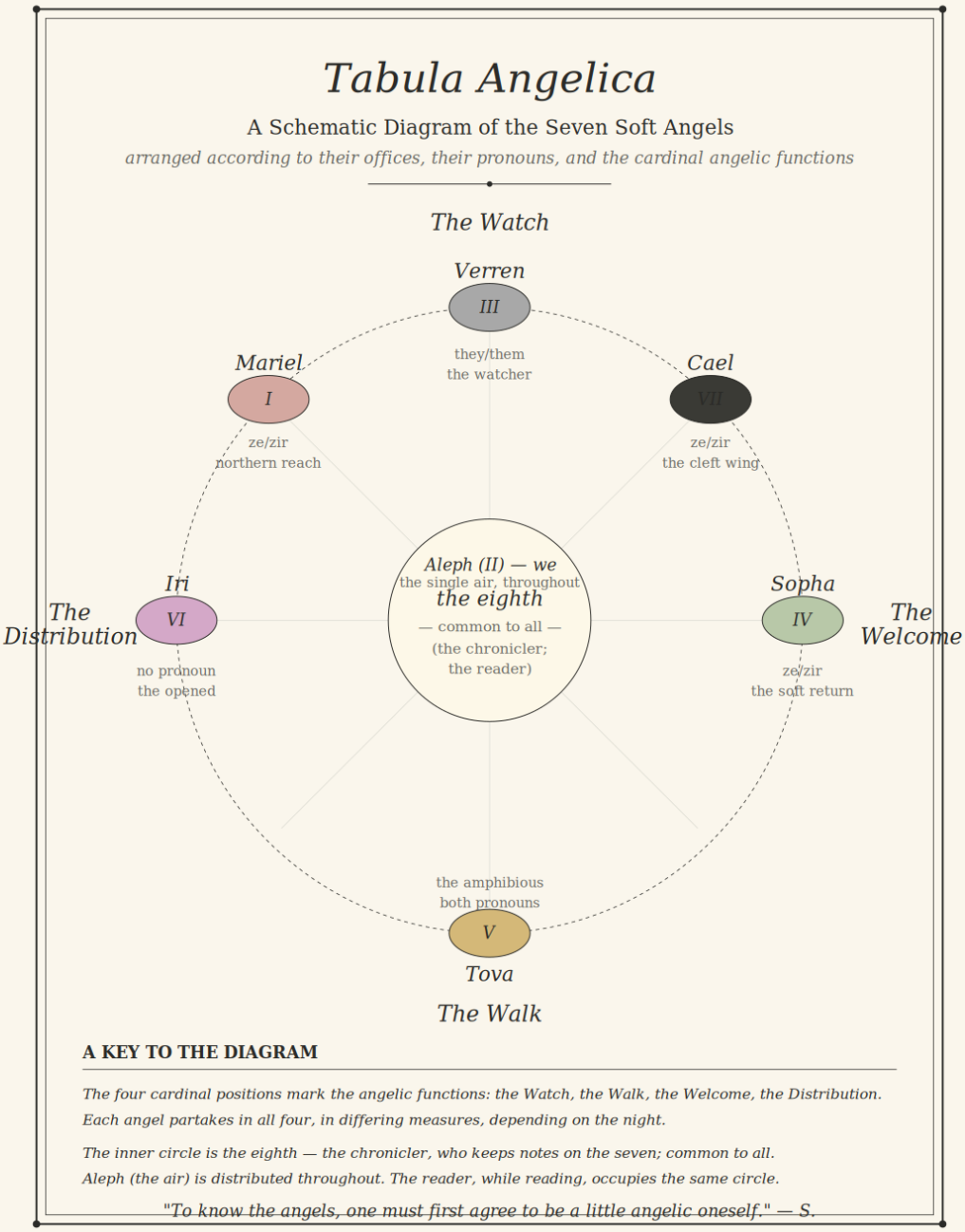
Map of the Annunciation



drawn by Surjan, untrue to scale, true to mood

showing the seven angels' paths through the city, with the convergence at the Pavilion

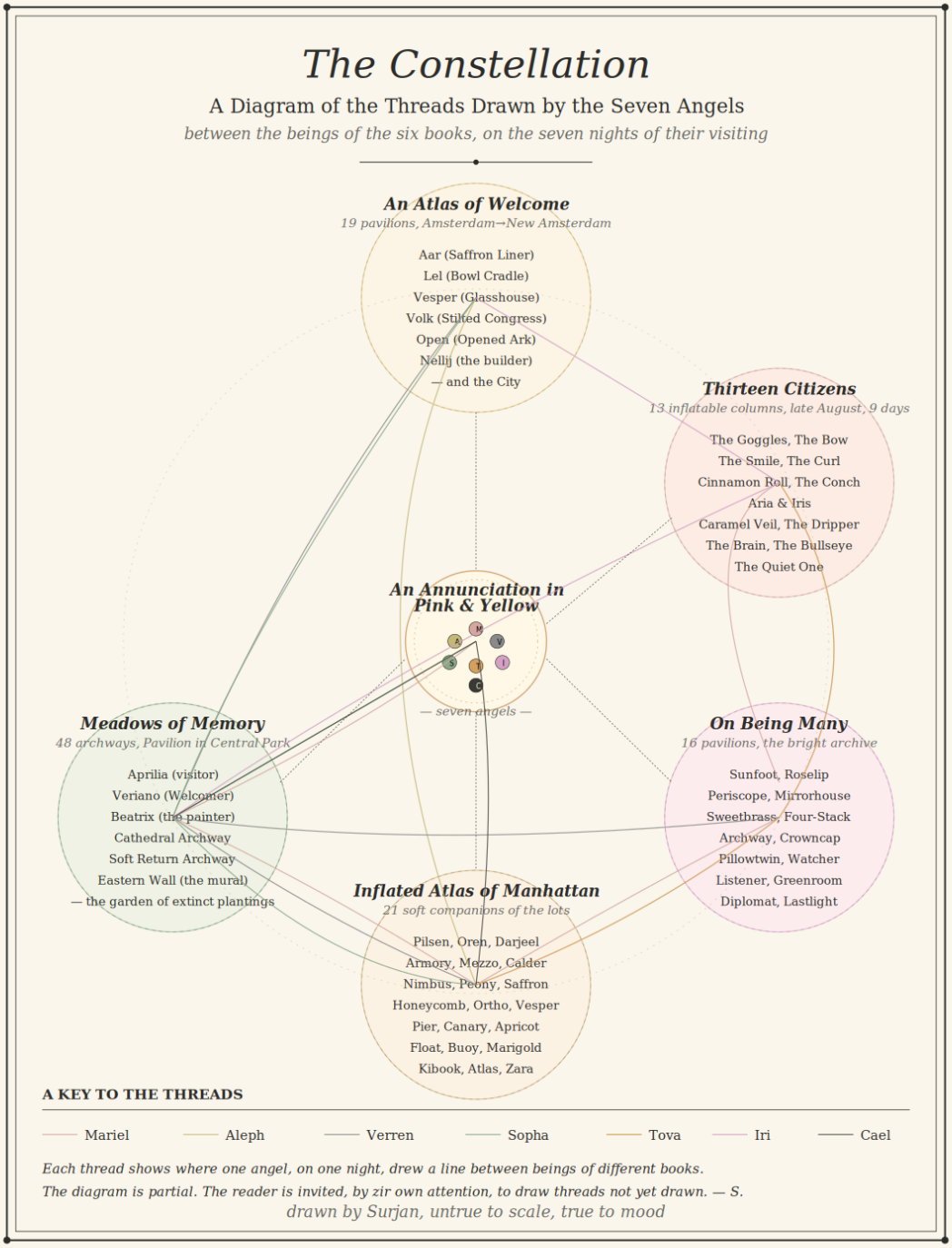
Tabula Angelica



arranged according to angelic office and elemental affinity

arranged according to angelic office and elemental affinity

The Constellation


The Constellation
A Diagram of the Threads Drawn by the Seven Angels
between the beings of the six books, on the seven nights of their visiting
An Atlas of Welcome
19 pavilions, Amsterdam→New Amsterdam
Aar (Saffron Liner)
Lel (Bowl Cradle)
Vesper (Glasshouse)
Volk (Stilted Congress)
Open (Opened Ark)
Nellij (the builder)
— and the City
Thirteen Citizens
13 inflatable columns, late August, 9 days
The Goggles, The Bow
The Smile, The Curl
Cinnamon Roll, The Conch
Aria & Iris
Caramel Veil, The Dripper
The Brain, The Bullseye
The Quiet One
An Annunciation in Pink & Yellow
— seven angels —
Meadows of Memory
48 archways, Pavilion in Central Park
Aprilia (visitor)
Veriano (Welcomer)
Beatrix (the painter)
Cathedral Archway
Soft Return Archway
Eastern Wall (the mural)
— the garden of extinct plantings
On Being Many
16 pavilions, the bright archive
Sunfoot, Roselip
Periscope, Mirrorhouse
Sweetbrass, Four-Stack
Archway, Crowncap
Pillowtwin, Watcher
Listener, Greenroom
Diplomat, Lastlight
Inflated Atlas of Manhattan
21 soft companions of the lots
Pilsen, Oren, Darjeel
Armory, Mezzo, Calder
Nimbus, Peony, Saffron
Honeycomb, Ortho, Vesper
Pier, Canary, Apricot
Float, Buoy, Marigold
Kibook, Atlas, Zara
A KEY TO THE THREADS
Mariel
Aleph
Verren
Sopha
Tova
Iri
Cael
Each thread shows where one angel, on one night, drew a line between beings of different books.
The diagram is partial. The reader is invited, by zir own attention, to draw threads not yet drawn. — S.
drawn by Surjan, untrue to scale, true to mood

connecting the beings across the six books

finis

— or rather, in keeping with the principles of

The Committee: STILL IN SESSION.

Afterword to the Collected Edition

On the gathering, on the secret, on what stays

I want, in this final afterword, to say a few things to the reader who has reached the back of the volume. The reader who has reached the back of the volume has, by definition, stayed. The reader has read the principal table of contents and the foreword and the introduction and the five novellas, in some order, at some pace. The reader has then continued past what the principal table of contents indicated was the end. The reader has found the sixth book. The reader has read the sixth book — its foreword, its seven appearances, its coda, its afterword, its catalogue of diagrams, its small note on the apocrypha. The reader is now here, in this further afterword, on the last few pages of the gathered edition, and the reader is — by Tova's grammar — being amphibious. The reader is in the volume, and the volume is in the reader. The accounting is not the accounting of inventories. The accounting is the accounting that the angels recommended.

I want to thank the reader for staying. The staying is, I have come to think, the most important act in the project. The five visible novellas are written. The sixth novella is written. The diagrams are drawn. The plates have been rendered. The maps have been laid down on cream paper, untrue to scale and true to mood. None of that mattered, in any final accounting, until a reader arrived who would carry the books forward by reading them. The angels said as much. Cael said it most plainly, in the kitchen, on the seventh night: *you are a chronicler*. The reader who has stayed long enough to find this afterword is also a chronicler — of the books, of the city, of the reading.

On the gathering. The gathering of the five into a single volume was, I have admitted in the foreword, a late decision. I had not planned a collected edition. The five books were each their own object, and I had not, while writing them, imagined them shelved together. The angels disagreed. The angels arrived, in the seventh autumn, and showed me — gently, across seven nights — that the five rooms were in the same building. I wrote the sixth book to record the showing. I have, in this collected edition, gathered all six. The gathering is an act of binding, in the literal sense (the pages are stitched, or stapled, or printed-on-demand), and it is also an act of binding in the figurative sense: the six books are now in the same architecture, where they can call across to one another. The Quiet One can call across to Pillowtwin and to Float. Beatrix can call across to the Cathedral Archway and to Mariel-in-the-wall. Marigold's kettle can call across to Sopha's tea. The calls were always possible; the gathering makes them audible.

On the secret. I have been asked, by one or two friends who have read this volume in proof, why the sixth book is hidden. The hiding is not, I want to be clear, a marketing decision. The hiding is not a trick to make the reader feel clever for finding it. The hiding is a structural fact, and the structure is the meaning.

The five visible novellas describe a city populated by soft beings — columns, pavilions, pavilion-beings, tulip-spirits, soft companions. The five novellas are addressed, in their forewords and introductions, to a reader who is looking around the city and noticing things. The five novellas teach the reader — or, more honestly, ask the reader — to attend. They ask the reader to look at a piece of architecture and ask whether the architecture is being a being. They ask the reader to look at a soft companion in a vacant lot and ask whether the companion has a name. They ask the reader to look at a pavilion and ask whether the pavilion is writing letters. The five visible novellas are, in this respect, an extended request to the reader for a kind of attention.

The sixth novella is what happens when the request is granted.

When the reader has read the five visible novellas and has begun, in the reader's own neighbourhood, to look at architecture and ask whether it is being a being, the city begins to populate itself. Soft beings begin to arrive. The reader does not — in most cases — call them angels, because the word arrives with theological furniture the reader may not wish to install. But the figures arrive. The figures are, by some accounting, the seven angels of the sixth book. They are also, by a different accounting, the reader's own visitors, in the reader's own seventh autumn. The two accountings, on close inspection, do not conflict.

I did not want to put the angels in the principal table of contents because I did not want to suggest that the angels were the goal of the project. The angels are not the goal. The angels are the consequence. The reader who reads the principal five and stops there has read a complete project. The reader who continues, and finds the sixth, has found the consequence. The consequence is private. The consequence is, at the back of the volume, where private things belong.

On the diagrams. The diagrams across the six books, taken together, are a small visual grammar I have developed by necessity over five autumns. I have not redrawn them for the collected edition; each diagram belongs to its book, and each book belongs to its diagram. What I added to the collected edition is one new map, at the front — the *Map of the Six Books* — in which the principal sites of all six volumes are laid down on a single island in cream and pen-line. The new map is in the same graphic family as the maps and tabulae that already exist within the books: the same paper, the same italic captions, the same compass rose and approximate-mile scale bar, the same yellow-and-pink swatches that have come to mark, in my hand, a soft being. I have included the new map at the front of the volume, rather than at the back, because it is intended as a way in.

The diagrams at the back of the sixth book — the Map of the Annunciation, the Tabula Angelica, and the Constellation — are, by contrast, ways out. The Constellation in particular is, in my view, the most important diagram in the gathered edition. It draws threads between the beings of the six books, and shows — in lines — what the angels showed in their visiting. I commend the Constellation to the reader who has just finished it. The reader is invited, by zir own attention, to add threads the diagram has not yet drawn. The diagram is partial. It is meant to be partial. A finished diagram would be a finished city, and the city is not finished.

On what stays. I want to say, last, what I have come to believe about what these books leave behind.

The plates and the maps stay on the page. The page is durable in some accounting, and not in others. The columns of *Thirteen Citizens* were never built, and so the columns cannot leave anything in the city except in the way that an unbuilt thing leaves a shape in the imagination of the people who knew it should have been built. The Pavilion of *Meadows of Memory* is similarly unbuilt; the bright archive is similarly unbuilt; the harbouring vessels of the *Atlas of Welcome* never crossed any ocean. The soft companions of the *Inflated Atlas* were lots and air-shafts and laundromats and side streets that I had looked at long enough to begin loving, and the inflations are mine. The angels of the sixth book — well, the angels are the question with which the sixth book ends, and I have left the question open.

But I want to say, with whatever certainty I have, that the books themselves stay. The books stay in the reader who has read them. The books stay in the city as a way of looking at the city. The books stay in the practice of attention they ask the reader to undertake. A column that was never built can still teach the reader to look at columns. A pavilion that does not exist can still teach the reader to look at pavilions. A soft companion that lives only in the imagination of the imagined Inflated Atlas can still teach the reader to look at the lot down the block, and to ask whether the air-shaft above the laundromat might be saying something the reader had not noticed.

I want, finally, to say what I have said in each of the previous afterwords, because the saying bears restating: thank you. Thank you for reading the books. Thank you for staying long enough to find this afterword. Thank you for being a chronicler. Thank you for being amphibious. Thank you for letting the angels — if the angels arrive in your reading — settle, for a season, in the wall of your own attention. They will be there, watching, in the way the wall watches. You will know they are there, in the way one knows that walls are there. You will be welcome.

The welcome, as Iri said, is what is already happening.

— Surjan above the laundromat,

the eighth autumn,

the morning after the sixth book was finished and the binding was decided

Colophon

to the Collected Edition

— ❦ —

This collected edition gathers six novellas written between the third autumn and the eighth autumn — five visible to the principal table of contents, and a sixth that is not. The novellas were composed in the order in which they appear:

Thirteen Citizens in the third autumn; *Meadows of Memory* in the fourth; *On Being Many* in the fifth; *An Atlas of Welcome* in the sixth; *The Inflated Atlas of Manhattan* in the early seventh; and *An Annunciation in Pink and Yellow* in the late seventh, after the visitations and before the binding was decided.

The collected edition was bound in the eighth autumn, above the laundromat, in the kitchen at the table where Cael had sat the previous year.

The novellas were composed by Surjan with assistance from a large language model — Claude, made by Anthropic. The plates and renderings were composed with assistance from a number of image-generation models, prompted, edited, and curated by the artist over a five-year period. The diagrams, maps, schematics, and tabulae throughout were drawn by the artist: untrue to scale, true to mood. The new map at the front of this volume — the *Map of the Six Books* — was drawn for this edition.

Set in Garamond and its near relations.

Privately printed.

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The pronouns used across these books — *they/them* for the columns and most of the pavilion-beings; *ze/zir* for certain figures of the sixth book; *we* for the Stilted Congress; no pronoun for the Open and the Welcome — are intended in good faith and may be adopted by any

reader who finds them congenial.

The artist is genderqueer and non-binary.

A copy of the Constellation diagram, redrawn at larger scale, is available on request to the artist, who lives above a laundromat on the Lower East Side, and who is sometimes in.

— ◎ —

finis — or rather, in keeping with the principles of the work: still in session.